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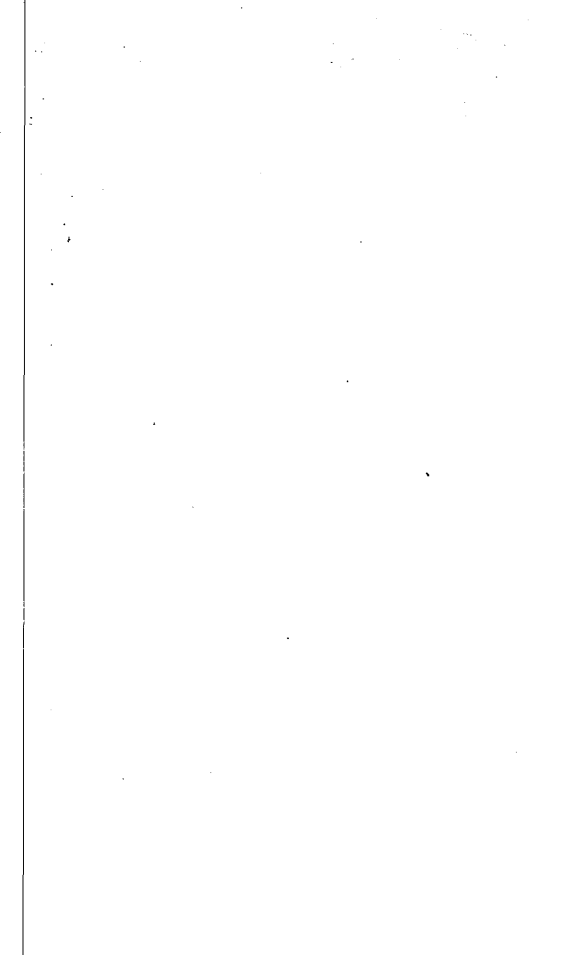
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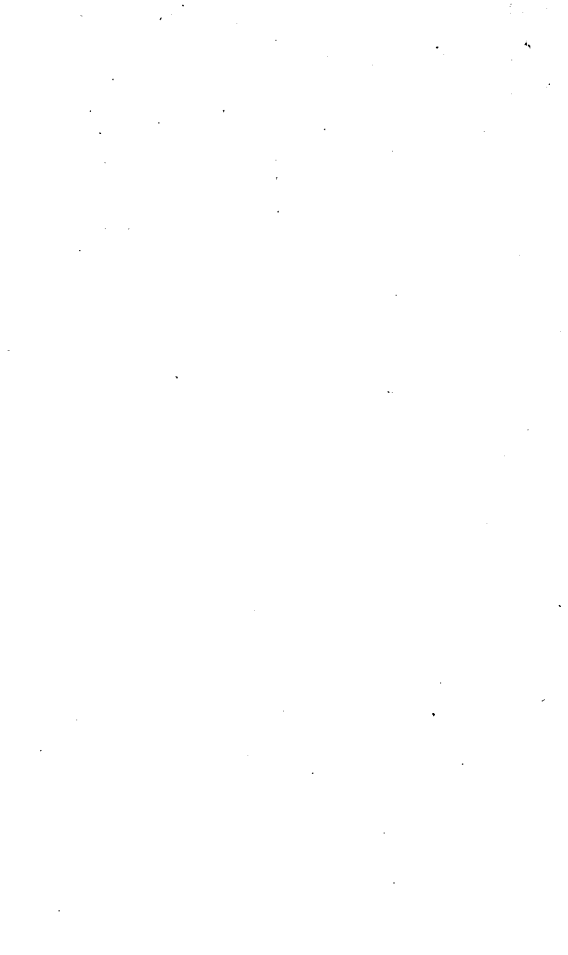
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LAODICEA;

OR,

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION.

ITS NATURE, INDICATIONS, CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES,
AND REMEDIES.

AN ESSAY,

BY

DAVID EVERARD FORD,

AUTHOR OF "DECAPOLIS," "CHORAZIN," "DAMASCUS," ETC.

"Unto the angel of the church in LAODICEA, write;—I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot. ... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous, therefore, and repent."—Rev. iii. 14, 15, 19.

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PREFACE.

CIRCUMSTANCES, of little interest to the reader, although of great importance to myself, have delayed this book long beyond the time intended for its publication. As, however, the preceding volumes are not yet quite forgotten, and this will in all probability be the last, some who purchased the others may not be disinclined now to complete the series. Relying on this persuasion, and desirous not to increase the price, I have ventured on a larger impression than a limited demand will justify.

I am aware that the present treatise will have to contend with one peculiar difficulty, which will greatly interfere with its circulation; —the class for whom it is chiefly intended will be indisposed to read it. A further hinderance may be expected on other grounds. It is not unlikely that some, who are “at ease in Zion,”

will think this Essay a libel on the piety of the times, and on that account, so far as their influence extends, will discountenance its sale. Nevertheless, I cherish the hope that God will prosper it, notwithstanding. And, should it never repay the cost of publication, if through its instrumentality one backslider should be led to ask again for "the old paths," to find "the good way, and to walk therein," I shall in no wise lose my reward.

If, in a few instances, a similarity of thought and expression to an anonymous article which appeared some time since, in one of our religious periodicals, should be found in these pages, a circumstance, which will readily occur to the mind of the reader, renders further explanation unnecessary. This, I think it right to mention, because nothing is more contemptible than plagiarism.

D. E. F.

Manchester, August 29, 1844.

LAODICEA.

CHAPTER I.

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION, AS TO ITS NATURE.

RELIGION, properly so called, is the love of God, shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost, Rom. v. 5. In its lowest condition, it presupposes regeneration, John iii. 3 ; for regeneration is the commencement of spiritual life ; and no man is a religious man, in the Christian acceptance of the term, unless he is renewed in the spirit of his mind, Eph. iv. 23, and justified by faith, 1 Cor. vi. 11.

The necessary transformation of character which marks the conversion of a soul from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, Acts xxvi. 18, is, of all changes incidental to humanity, the most remarkable and the most important. The man, who when dead in trespasses and sins walked according to

the course of this world, Eph. ii. 2, awakes to consciousness in a world entirely new. The former things are done away, 2 Cor. v. 17. Notions, cherished in the days of his ignorance as the very axioms of knowledge, vanish like the dreams of the night, or the mists of the morning. Things of which, at the best, he had but a faint and dubious impression, stand forth as facts,—substantial, undeniable facts,—in which he has a personal, an inalienable, an incalculable interest. No longer does he think it problematical whether God has spoken to man, for he has heard his voice. No longer does he regard it as a matter of doubtful disputation whether the Gospel is divine, for he has found it the power of God to the salvation of the soul.

So with the doctrines of revelation. Instead of being regarded as matters of abstract science, belonging of necessity to the schools of theology, but containing nothing to interest the multitude, the verities of faith and holiness, beautiful and resplendent with the light of heaven, appear as “a rainbow round about the throne,” a token of divine complacency on which the very angels delight to gaze.

There was once an intelligent sceptic, who

hearing that some devoted Christians were meeting together, to offer special prayer for the influences of the Holy Spirit, resolved to go, in order, as he expressed it, to see what these foolish people were about, and to ascertain, if possible, the idea which they attached to such a service. He went ; and, while he was listening to their supplications, wakened up as if from a long and dreary dream. Then, for the first time in his life, did he apprehend the plan of human redemption. The very doctrine which he had long regarded as the offspring of the wildest enthusiasm, in one instant, approved itself to his understanding, his conscience, and his heart. Forthwith, he himself became a man of prayer ; and throughout his subsequent course, he regarded that memorable season as the hour of his conversion.

It has been a subject of learned disputation, whether the faith which saves the soul, is the exercise of the understanding, or of the affections, or of both. Admitting, however, that the understanding puts forth the act in question, the affections must supply the test of its reality. For, such are the facts of redemption, that to believe them, "in deed and in truth," is to believe them with the heart, Rom. x. 10.

Such are they, in their very nature, that they cannot receive full credence without a corresponding homage of the affections. If I believe that Jesus died for me, love him in return I must. And if, with a semblance of such faith, I am destitute of the love which it necessarily awakens, by that circumstance I prove that my faith is vain, and that I am yet in my sins.

From the moment of his regeneration, the affections of the convert are willingly and gratefully enlisted on the side of truth and holiness. The Saviour of sinners forthwith receives the welcome of a heart where the warmest sympathies, of country and of kindred, are thenceforth held as nothing in comparison with his surpassing claims. To do the will of God is now understood to be the highest attainment of man; and to promote the glory of His name, who loved us and gave himself for us, is felt to be an employment worthy of eternity.

At such a crisis, no parleying is held with selfishness, or worldly interest, or temptation. The claims of religion are paramount, and constitute a source of happiness, a well-spring of life to the soul, of which immortal blessedness is but the fitting consummation.

Entire conformity to the image of God, now becomes the exclusive object of ambition ; and, in order to its attainment, the crucifixion of the flesh, with the affections and lusts, Gal. v. 24, is accounted not only easy but delightful. Hence, the triumphant declaration—"I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live ; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," chap. ii. 20. To the soul which is strengthened with might, according to his glorious power, self-denial wears a new appearance, and assumes another name ; for the regenerate man delights himself in God, and the cross becomes his glory and his boast, chap. vi. 14.

No exception can be taken to this statement from the circumstance that the most eminent saints have disavowed all claim to excellence, and have even accounted themselves the chief of sinners. The very confession of having not attained, neither having become already perfect, may stand associated with a forgetfulness of things behind, and a pressing forward to the things which are before, Phil. iii. 12, 13. Thus will deep humility, not only comport with real excellence, but become its inseparable accompaniment.

In the case of the Christian, dissatisfaction,

as to present attainments, arises not from the circumstance that the very objects of his pursuit, like the pleasures of the world, are in themselves unsatisfactory, (so that, when they are realized, they ill repay the strife and toil by which they were obtained,) but that, the greater his happiness, the greater becomes his capacity for bliss. He lives above the world, and breathes the atmosphere of heaven ; but, the higher he ascends, the more he regrets that he dwells so far below. He has left, beneath his feet, the mists of the valley and the clouds in their courses ; peradventure, he has even gained a region where those mists and clouds seldom shut out the sunshine ; but he beholds, beyond him and above him, heights over heights, and these he longs and intends to scale. And while he regards his present footing but as the table-land where he may recruit himself a little for nobler enterprise, he knows that, should he reach the highest point of all, he will but stand on the utmost boundary of an earthly planet, while worlds upon worlds will revolve beyond him, in the boundlessness of space and the plenitude of celestial glory.

Perhaps, some may charge this statement with exaggeration. Appeal we then “to the

law and to the testimony.” The real question, be it remembered, is not as to the popular notion of religious excellence, but as to its scriptural standard. It may be that the church, in general, has set its mark too low, and that much passes for piety, which ill deserves the name. It may be—(and who shall dare to dispute the fearful fact, since our Lord himself has foretold it!)—it may be, that some who were once accounted saints, shall find their place, at last, with the workers of iniquity. These things, and a thousand others, of which the world is utterly unmindful, and of which the church has but a very slight impression, are possible, probable, and certain. But, that the blessed Jesus should have misrepresented the characteristics of personal piety, or the nature and extent of Christian discipleship, is utterly inconceivable.

There is no need to multiply quotations ; a single passage will suffice.

“ And there went great multitudes with him, and he turned and said unto them,—If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not

bear his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. So, likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple," Luke xiv. 25—27, 33.

The obvious intention of this discourse, was not to supply a few of his most favoured followers, as Peter, and James, and John, with some superior standard of excellence, unknown and unimagined by the rest of their brethren, but it was to tell "great multitudes," the nature of his service. The very circumstance, that these words were addressed to a promiscuous crowd, clearly shows his design to have been that—of the poor to whom the Gospel was preached, Matt. xi. 5, of the common people who heard him gladly, Mark xii. 37—not one should go away to his own home accounting himself a disciple of Messiah, unless prepared, with him, to go all lengths and share all hazards. And, although it would be a waste of labour to prove that it was no part of his intention that those who welcomed his claims should show themselves destitute of natural affection, (any more than it was to commend the virtue of suicide,) yet, was it the evident design of this discourse, to explain the nature of that love, and the ardour of that zeal, which

would enable them satisfactorily to answer the question—"What do ye more than others?" Without controversy, then, it plainly teaches, that where the claims of Christ are not accounted more valuable than property, and more dear than affection, yea, and more precious than life itself, there is no Christianity.

Surely, none will pretend, that an amount of consecration which was reasonable then, would be Utopian now; and that services, cheerfully rendered to Christ when on earth, can be expected no longer, since he has ascended to heaven. Every intelligent mind must at once perceive that the only alteration, in this respect, is that of augmented claims. The "great multitudes," who listened to the discourse in question, were little aware of his real glory. They thought him a teacher sent from God, they knew that he could heal diseases and pardon sins, and this was all, or nearly all, that they knew concerning him. At that time, and previous to his crucifixion, even the apostles but little understood the nature of his mission, and nothing was further from their thoughts than a correct apprehension of "the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow." In addition, therefore, to every consideration

which might, in the first instance, be supposed to influence their minds, his claims are now enforced by the mysteries and triumphs of redeeming love;—a circumstance, neither unfelt, nor unacknowledged, by those disciples who lived to see the kingdom of God coming with power. Accordingly, their subsequent views of personal religion, as set forth in the later portions of the New Testament, must now be regarded as the standard of vital godliness through all the succeeding ages of the Christian dispensation.

Take, as a specimen, the following verses.

“ For this cause, I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might, by his Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye being rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend, *with all saints*, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God,” Eph. iii. 14—19.

This passage is not more remarkable for its

sublimity, than it is for the circumstance that it was evidently intended for nothing more than a familiar representation of personal religion. The apostle, be it observed, asked not that these Gentile converts might be able to comprehend, better than other saints, the things in question, but that, with saints in general, they might enjoy and manifest those dispositions and attainments which naturally and necessarily distinguish the household of faith.

Should the reader here be constrained to acknowledge that, if this be religion, he knows nothing about it, let him bless God for that discovery. *This is religion, and this alone.* And, whether perceived at present or not, such will it undoubtedly appear, when eternity shall explain the sentence—"If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha!" 1 Cor. xvi. 22. How much better to comprehend it now, than then!

These preliminary observations are intended to prepare the way for the subject of the present treatise. For, since religious declension involves a departure from some previous standard, it is necessary that, first of all, the standard itself should be satisfactorily ascertained.

But, admitting the correctness of the state-

ments preceding, admitting that such is the love, required by the Saviour of the world; and rendered by all who believe and obey him, it becomes, at least, a reasonable question—Can such affection ever subside ; or love, so devoted, ever expire ?

Without perplexing ourselves with the questions, on this subject, which have engaged the attention of the schoolmen, and have been the matter of interesting debate (and, in some measure, the ground of denominational distinction) between two important sections of the Christian church, it will be sufficient, for the present purpose, to treat the subject in a practical way.

At the outset then, let us turn to the apostolic age for cases in point. Unhappily, they present themselves in abundance. Few are the epistles which contain no censures for the faithful, or which would leave the reader to conclude that the early Christians had all attained and become already perfect. Signs of declension and apostasy closely followed the planting of the churches. In some instances, the removal, or death, of an apostle was hardly waited for, before the mystery of iniquity began to work ;—a circumstance which elicited the

cutting remark—"I marvel that ye are *so soon* removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ, unto another gospel," Gal. i. 6.

Of the early triumphs of Christianity, none was more remarkable than that at Ephesus. In that stronghold of idolatry, "so mightily grew the word of God and prevailed," that from a handful of disciples,—and those so ignorant of their own Scriptures that, previously to the arrival of Paul, they knew not whether there was any Holy Ghost,—the church so rapidly increased, that multitudes of the worshippers of Diana were converted to the faith, and many who had dealt in curious arts, (men whose compact with the devil, whether real or pretended, had sufficed to prove that they were "taken captive by him at his will,") not only abandoned their nefarious practices, but having embraced the Gospel themselves they put it beyond the reach of others to follow their pernicious ways, for "they brought their books together, and burned them before all men, and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver." Nor was this all. For even "the vagabond Jews," pretenders to exorcism, finding their occupation gone, as a last expe-

dient to save a sinking reputation, “took upon them, to call over them which had evil spirits, the name of the Lord Jesus;”—an incident which proves how deep a hold the truth had gained on the public mind. Yet, amidst all this prosperity, and while popular feeling was so strongly on the side of pure Christianity, did an apostle foresee that, after his departing, grievous wolves would enter in, not sparing the flock, and that of their own selves also, (a circumstance which may serve to show that apostolic succession, even at its fountain head, was no security from error,) would men arise, “speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them,” Acts xx. 30. And, finally, to this very church, it was, that “He, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks,” sent the affecting message—“Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee; because thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent,” Rev. ii. 4, 5.

Similar cases of defection, elsewhere, might easily be adduced, but it seems unnecessary.

Every intelligent sunday-school child already knows, that not a single country, or district, or city, or town, or village, mentioned in the New Testament, is now remarkable for piety. In fact, the globe itself contains not a single graveyard where the motive which would induce an enlightened Christian to leave his bones would be, that with kindred saints who, from the date of the holy sepulchre until now, had lived and died in that vicinity, he might share the slumbers of the grave and await the resurrection of the just. Throughout those interesting regions which were the father-land of prophets and apostles, and which were hallowed by the footsteps of God manifested in the flesh, a nominal Christianity, scarcely if at all preferable to the Mohammedanism by which it is surrounded, is all that remains of ancient piety. The only exception is found in here and there a convert, reclaimed by foreign zeal, to an earlier and purer faith.

To descend to modern days. A similar tendency, to spiritual decay, appears in the history of various religious bodies, which it is needless to specify. Numerous are the instances where the posts of confessors and martyrs, who went to prison and to death, "for the word of

God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ," have since been holden by men whose views of religion would justify no one in making for it, in that or any other form, the slightest sacrifice.

But, from communities we proceed to individuals. Of these, for the most part, the mention in the New Testament is so very brief, that all we can know about them must be gathered from a few words. Demas, who "loved this present world," 2 Tim. iv. 10, Diotrephes, who sought "to have the pre-eminence," 3 John 9, and even John, whose surname was Mark, "who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work," Acts xv. 38, were probably instances of religious declension;—cases in which the ardour of piety had been allowed to settle down into prudent zeal and questionable godliness. For that reason, the last was regarded, by the apostle of the Gentiles, as an unsuitable companion in his visits to the brethren, and he accordingly left him behind when he "went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches," verses 36—41. His subsequent conduct, however, appears to have restored him to perfect confidence; for we find the same apostle, who then declined his services, some

years afterwards, writing to Timothy—"Take Mark, and bring him with thee; for he is profitable to me for the ministry," 2 Tim. iv. 11;—a circumstance which may afford encouragement to the backslider now, if he will but turn again to the Lord, Lam. iii. 40.

Individual religious declension, in modern times, is so painfully familiar, that confessions of it are not unfrequently taken for proofs of humility and spirituality. To a certain extent they may be such, (for all must admit, that in every case of transgression or disobedience, a denial of sin is an aggravation of guilt;) but, for Christian people to regard such habitual acknowledgments as compatible with a satisfactory condition of piety, bespeaks an obliquity of perception for which it is difficult to account. Of one thing, however, we may rest assured, "this persuasion" came not of Him that called them;—they have not so learned Christ. Increasing thankfulness may humble us under a sense of past ingratitude, and aspirations for holiness may render us extremely sensitive as to remaining imperfection; but, to account the bare confession of our failings an evidence of piety, is to make our doubts the warrant of our confidence, and our misgivings the reason of our

hopes. A process this, than which nothing can be more irrational.

To so fearful an extent does misapprehension prevail on this subject, that few things are more common than to represent the earliest stages of the Christian life as, of course and by necessity, the happiest. And such, indeed, for this reason, they oftentimes are found. The young convert is told to expect religious declension. He forms his views and purposes accordingly ; and so, the prediction accomplishes its own fulfilment.

This is a subject on which I can write most feelingly. Well do I remember that when I was a Christian of about ten days old, a disciple, of long and honourable standing, laid his hand upon my head, and said—"My dear lad, I bless God for what he has done for you. But, remember that these are early days, and that your present feelings will not last for ever. You are now a young recruit, and may enjoy your spending-money ; but the battle will come by-and-by." More than thirty years have passed since then ; but I recollect his words as though it had been but yesterday. They made too sad an impression on my heart to be easily forgotten. But he ought to have told me, although he did

not, that growth in grace is essential to vital godliness ;—that if experience has its pains, it has its pleasures too ;—that if warfare brings its toils, it also brings its triumphs ;—and, above all, he should have cautioned me, that if my earliest days should prove my happiest, life would at last appear to have been spent to very little purpose.

There are some things connected with incipient piety, which will undoubtedly pass away. The charm of novelty, for instance, and the surprise of the mind as it first wakes up to unheeded truth. But these are rather accidents than essentials, and their disappearance may arise from other causes than declension. Supposing an individual, suddenly raised from poverty and retaining a lively recollection of its manifold privations, to be adopted by a prince, and introduced to all the luxuries and honours of a royal court, astonishment, at so great a change of circumstances, might be expected for a while to exercise upon him an almost overpowering influence. The strange and vast transition would engross his thoughts, and monopolize his dreams. But, as the scenes of splendour, amidst which he moved, became familiar, this feeling would subside, and gradually give place

to a more tranquil state of mind. And, in the course of time, he would learn to regard these things as though he had been accustomed to them all his days. But, to find in this instance a parallel to the case of the religious backslider, we must suppose that not only did the astonishment in question pass away, but that there went with it, as well, his sense of grateful obligation to that illustrious personage, who lifted him from the dunghill, to set him among princes. The first case would relate to impression, the second—to principle. In the former instance, the apostasy would be that of the imagination, but in the latter,—that of the affections. And such, in truth, is religious declension.

CHAPTER II.

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION, AS TO ITS INDICATIONS.

IN order to the successful treatment of bodily disease, it is necessary, first of all, to ascertain its symptoms. The same remark will apply to the maladies of the soul. And, in either instance, intentional concealment avails for nothing, save the disadvantage of the sufferer.

As the design of the present chapter is to specify the indications of religious declension, I would, at the outset, beseech the reader to treat the subject honestly. The most explicit demonstration of his case will be lost upon him, should he refuse to see it ; or, seeing it, should labour to explain it away. The whole need not the physician, but they that are sick ; and Jesus came, not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance, Mark ii. 17.

Some of the indications of religious declension are so plain as to need no comment. If whatsoever things are lovely, and of good report,

are found in connexion with healthful piety, the contrary may be expected to mark its declining condition. And, as in the case of the sinner, so of the backslider, "some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after," 1 Tim. v. 24.

Few things, however, are so impracticable as candid and ingenuous confession. The backslider, almost invariably, strives to make the best of his case, and so he yields himself a voluntary victim of self-deception. "He feedeth on ashes, a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say—Is there not a lie in my right hand?" Isaiah xlv. 20. Indeed, this very circumstance is one of the indications of that declension which it strives to conceal. "For every one that doeth evil, hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved;" whereas, "he that doeth truth, cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God," John iii. 20, 21.

This indisposition will further display itself in relation to those exercises of the mind which are of a decidedly spiritual character, and will probably be proportioned to their very spirituality. The man may, perhaps, retain his

attachment to some form of sound words which embodies his creed ; he may, occasionally, even delight himself with general meditations bearing on the divine character and government ; but, in the absence of “the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry—Abba, Father,” Rom. viii. 15, holy exercises, of the highest order, will become obsolete. The soul that has impaired its affiance in God, will cease to find its home at the mercy seat. Hence, the familiar adage—“Apostasy begins at the closet door.”

Meanwhile, the religious sympathies of the backslider will not lie in the direction of the most devout of his acquaintance. To him, there will be something unpalatable in the very savour of their piety. Their presence, even, will impose an unwelcome restraint. Afraid, on every such occasion, lest anything should transpire to reveal his real character, he will endeavour to conceal his spiritual incapacity by vague admissions and general observations ; and, when the interview is over, he will think himself happy, if once again he has escaped detection.

Another modification of the same condition of mind, will probably manifest itself in his ecclesiastical preferences. Impatient of pastoral

oversight, he will resolve to worship where he can do as he likes, without the chance of being called to account by any one; or, still continuing to attend a faithful ministry, he will be more disposed to quarrel with the preacher than to submit to his remonstrances. It is nothing new for the servants of God to be disliked for their faithfulness. "There is yet," said Ahab, "one man, Micaiah, the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord: but I hate him, for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil," 1 Kings xxii. 8.

The tendency of the imagination will often throw unwelcome light on the real bias of the mind. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." When sin is really hated in all its forms, its symbols will be removed from the secret chambers of imagery. The understanding will find it no solace to ruminate on matters which the conscience disallows. "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God," Matt. v. 8. In their case, the current of the thoughts, when left to flow freely, will be "holiness to the Lord." Their spontaneous aspirations will invoke the agency of the sanctifying Spirit, to cleanse the very fountains of thought from all pollution. When, therefore,

the imaginations of the heart are only evil continually, Gen. vi. 5, that circumstance is a symptom of wickedness still remaining, of sin still rampant and striving for the mastery, of unmortified corruption, which only waits the removal of some remaining barrier to break forth in a torrent of bitterness and death.

Were the whole history of individual apostasy exposed to view, it would doubtless appear, that cases of defection which have filled the church with mourning and hell with triumph, have originated thus. The poison was rankling unobserved, long before it assumed those final and fatal symptoms which none could mistake. "Is thy servant a dog that he should do this?"—was the indignant exclamation of one on hearing a prophet foretell the deeds which he appears afterwards to have perpetrated without one feeling of remorse, 2 Kings viii. 13.

The first license which is given to the mind, in its most secret meditations, to wander from the paths of truth and holiness, is the commencement of a downward course, of which Omniscience alone can discern the issue; "for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false wit-

ness, blasphemies," Matt. xv. 19. And though the mischief may be long concealed, "then, when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death," James i. 15.

Wherever there is an inclination to parley with temptation, it may be assumed that religion is in a declining state. Vigorous piety would at once repudiate the tendency to evil. The petition of the psalmist—"Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity," Psalm cxix. 37, is but a principle embodied in a prayer; and where the principle is violated, the prayer is only mockery. To supplicate grace to resist temptation, and then to throw ourselves into its way, is to trifle on the very threshold of the mercy seat, and under the immediate and requested inspection of God himself. "Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord," James i. 7.

In this case, impatience of holy restraint will soon afford a further indication of the same order. Backsliders are frequently disposed to treat with contempt the strictness of religious propriety. I have known them affect to find a larger measure of intelligence in connexion with a wider range of laxity. And, to justify so

perverse a notion, they have represented the people who insist on trifles as righteous over-much, and have commended freedom in doubtful matters as mental independence.

It is a fearful characteristic of religious declension, if not of utter hypocrisy, to act a double part;—to bear one character at home and another abroad, to play the saint in the church and the sinner in the world. Such instances, unhappily, are not unknown. Christians, who live at watering-places and towns of fashionable resort, can tell sad tales, as to the conduct there, of some who elsewhere pass for religious people. And, if residents in the country have had reason to suspect the piety of certain citizens who have sojourned among them, they in turn have threatened reprisals, as to country friends and metropolitan amusements.

These cases, I would fain believe, are comparatively rare. But, if one in a hundred, or one in a thousand, of those who bear the name of Christ, can so far compromise religious integrity, it is matter of bitter lamentation. The excuse, that it is only for once, is utterly inadmissible. Once, and only once, is it appointed to man to die; but,

after death comes the judgment, Heb. ix. 27 ; and, never should the Christian place himself where he would blush to receive the message —“The Master is come, and calleth for thee.”

A disposition to find excuses for little sins, is utterly incompatible with true sanctity, and naturally leads to circumstances and associations from which a more sensitive piety would shrink. In this case, there will no longer be that care to avoid the very appearance of evil, by which enlightened devotedness is necessarily distinguished. On the contrary, the aim will be, rather to attenuate than to widen, the line of distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the man that serveth God and the man that serveth him not.

When once the religious renegade begins to think lightly of sin, the next stage, of his downward course, will be to cherish the suggestions of Satan, as to the threatened consequences of transgression. “Ye shall not surely die”—the primal falsehood which deceived and ruined the progenitors of our race, Gen. iii. 4, will then be welcomed as a consolatory truth. Unbelief will be hailed with complacency, and “the terrors of the Lord” be accounted of none effect.

The mind that has reached this pass, is prepared for another. The man, who can think lightly of the threatenings of God, will presently trifle with his promises as well. The sceptic of hell will become the sceptic of heaven, and settle down into utter disbelief. That disbelief may be concealed; it may even comport with an appearance of religion. And the miserable victim of latent infidelity may, in the meanwhile, endeavour to persuade himself that he is guiltless of hypocrisy, because, notwithstanding his scepticism, he still retains the conviction that the religion of the Bible is the nearest approach to truth in the universe;—a persuasion, however, which multitudes have cherished, who, nevertheless, have lived and died faithless and unbelieving.

Let but such views become habitual, and the way is open for anything and everything bad to follow. All salutary restraint is so far neutralized, that expediency will become the highest consideration. And expediency, as thus understood, will be selfishness in any form the individual may wish it to assume. Covetousness and intemperance, pride and sensuality, superstition and unbelief, whether found in connexion with apostasy or reprobation, are

but the varying symptoms of that spiritual malady which, unless speedily cured, must issue in the second death ;—or, to change the figure, but so many phases of that eclipse of the soul which denotes its progress to “the blackness of darkness for ever.”

It is worthy of special notice here, that indications of religious declension are not only variable but opposite ; as deviation from a path may be to the right or left. Thus, habitual levity and perpetual gloom may betoken a similar condition of soul ; since either may result from unmindfulness of God.

The same remark will apply to doctrinal departures from the faith, which are likewise found in directions the most opposite that can be imagined. For instance—a fickleness which veers with every wind of doctrine, and an obstinacy which sets at nought both fact and argument ;—a pietism which never moves one step beyond its own little cloister, and an incredulity which (like some unquiet spirit) walks through dry places, seeking rest and finding none ;—a superstition which relies on rites and forms, and a disregard of religious ordinances, such as bespeaks a mind, in its own esteem, wise, and pious, and heavenly enough

to dispense with them altogether ;—these, and a thousand other modifications of error, may alike result simply from the lack of that docility without which even the personal instructions of our blessed Lord himself would be thrown away, Mark x. 15 ; 1 Cor. iii. 18.

It is obvious to remark, that bitter complaints, of the lack of spirituality in others, may accord with a very low condition of piety in our own souls. Habitual grumblers are rarely eminent Christians. Oftentimes, they are the very nuisance of religion in the circle where they move. Never an ill report can reach them, be it true or false, but it obtains a currency which nothing but malignity could give. “Complainers, walking after their own lusts,” Jude 16, they find relief and consolation in exposing the faults of others ; and, like some reckless convict who delights to see that he is not alone in ruin, they are strangers to the charity which “rejoiceth not in iniquity.” And, even in more favourable cases, where no such motive can be imputed or entertained, there may be the self-satisfaction which suggests the caution—“Stand by thyself, for I am holier than thou ;”—and, since pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall, this saying, or this

feeling, suppose it which we may, is usually the precursor of ruin.

But, one infallible sign of religious declension will be found in indifference, as to the conversion of sinners and the revival of religion. Wherever there is a disposition to symbolize with unbelievers in deriding the efforts of devoted piety, (even should its plans not always be the most judicious,) it is a mournful augury. The prosperous Christian will be tenderly alive to the claims of Christ and the miseries of dying souls ; and, whatever would induce one to think lightly of either, is not according to godliness.

When once a man ceases to take a deep and lively interest in the progress of Christianity in the world, of one thing we may be certain,—it has ceased to make any progress in his own soul. And the very fastidiousness which pleads prudential reasons for withholding its sanction from vigorous efforts to rescue sinners from destruction, is not unfrequently the ill concealed result of a spirit of slumber ; the action of a mind but partially awakened to the claims of religion, or falling asleep again. Some excuse may perhaps be made on the ground of mental habitude ; but men, of all orders and dispositions, usually act vigorously when they feel

deeply. Whatever may be his chemical propensities, the philosopher, who believes that his house is on fire, will hardly wait to analyze the water which may quench the flames. And where the salvation of souls is at stake, excessive caution is a poor apology for the lack of promptitude.

It is necessary, however, to observe, that there may be a very large amount of sectarian zeal, where compassion for souls, in its best and highest form, has utterly decayed. We may be exceedingly anxious to prevail on others to worship *as* we worship, and *where* we worship, after we ourselves have ceased to worship "in spirit and in truth." Indeed, sectarian zeal is often found in inverse proportion to genuine piety; and many, without the shadow of a pretence to experimental religion, have shown a zeal for God, which, had it been according to knowledge, would have worn a far different aspect, and have produced far different results. Such was the case with the scribes and Pharisees, the hypocrites denounced by our Lord, as compassing sea and land to make one proselyte, and then, finishing the matter by making him twofold more the child of hell than themselves, Matt. xxiii. 15.

Impatience of rebuke is generally a symptom of religious declension which marks the whole of its progress, but more especially its closing stages. Faithfulness will first be disrelished, then disliked, and at last detested. The consistent Christian is always thankful for admonition. Jealous of himself, with a godly jealousy, and aware how difficult it is for a man to understand his errors, he will say—"Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness; and let him reprove me, it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head," Psalm cxli. 5. These are views and feelings with which the backslider has little sympathy. I have even heard one boast that, for his part, he would take reproof from no man.

Some glaring act of inconsistency will usually, at length, reveal to the public the mischief which was previously concealed from observation. That which was spoken in darkness is heard in the light, and that which was spoken in the ear in closets is proclaimed upon the housetops, Luke xii. 3. The friends of truth and holiness will first be at a loss to reconcile, with conduct observable by all, a profession which denied ungodliness and worldly lusts;

and, at length, they will abandon the attempt as hopeless.

Offence being taken at some remonstrance, or monition of better days, it is not improbable that the next indication, of a downward course, will be the occasional, or perhaps the entire neglect of public worship.

When the sanctuary is forsaken, a return to the world will be an easy step, which perhaps some yet more notorious departure from godliness may abundantly facilitate. The men of the world, for the most part, have no very hard notions of delinquency, except when the mischief relates to the affairs of this life, or in some way affects themselves. A man may utterly dishonour his religious profession, and for that very reason be the more welcome in their company. His presence will enable them to raise a louder laugh at all those pretensions to religion which take a higher range than the selfishness of mere earthly morality.

The remaining stages in the path to death, are few and easily taken. The man who stands in the way of sinners, will soon walk in the counsel of the ungodly, and finally sit in the seat of the scornful. But this is a subject which belongs rather to the consequences than to the

indications of declension, and must therefore be reserved for another chapter.

In the meanwhile, let it be borne in mind that no such parade of wickedness is necessary in order to insure the ruin of the soul. As the life of piety belongs to the hidden man of the heart, it is not a matter of course that, where there is religious declension, its symptoms are visible and obvious. The whole mischief may be accomplished in secret; it may be unimagined by others, and even unsuspected by the individual himself, Rev. iii. 17. Hence, nothing short of the beatific vision can render obsolete the prayer—"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting," Psalm cxxxix. 23, 24.

CHAPTER III.

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION, AS TO ITS CAUSES.

FOREMOST, among the causes of religious declension, must be placed that natural depravity which marks our position in the universe, as members of a fallen race. To subdue and exterminate that depravity, is the design of the revelation of mercy which God has committed to man ; but that design is accomplished, not by a physical, but by a moral process, and the completion of grace is reserved for glory. In the meanwhile, we have need of constant watchfulness and care, "lest any man fail of the grace of God," Heb. xii. 15 ; and, when at last we triumph, it is through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom, Acts xiv. 22. A thousand counteracting agencies are always in operation ; and it is only as these are vanquished and surmounted, that we can even hold

on our way, to say nothing of waxing stronger and stronger.

Something, analogous to this, may be seen in the material world. "The precious fruits of the earth" require the care of the husbandman, whereas, weeds are indigenous to the soil, and will flourish, not only without cultivation, but in spite of it. Thus it is with the downward tendencies of our moral constitution. "We have borne the image of the earthy," and its earthliness mingles even with "the image of the heavenly." In fact, we have worn our fetters so long, that, although they may be broken off and thrown away, we shall carry the scars of them to the grave. Our consolation is that the infirmities of the flesh shall perish there; and that, since our citizenship is in heaven, thence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself, Phil. iii. 20, 21.

But, while backsliding and apostasy, in all their varieties and modifications, are traceable to the sin that dwelleth in us, subsidiary causes exist in abundance; they surround us at every

step, and mingle with our most sacred associations. To specify those among them, which are the most common, and consequently the most destructive, is the object of the present chapter.

Of these, a misapprehension of piety is one. Some Christians think, or seem to think, that conversion is the whole of discipleship. With them, personal safety is everything; acceptable service, nothing. So that, provided a man be a new creature in Christ Jesus, it matters little whether he is strong or feeble, healthful or sickly, diligent or lazy. Accordingly, when an awakened sinner attains the assurance of hope, and knows, of a truth, that God, for Christ's sake, has pardoned all his sins, these teachers would leave him to "sit, and sing himself away to everlasting bliss." And, should he grow tired of singing, and inquire for work to do, they will caution him against "legality," as they call it, and assure him that "the whole duty of man" is to "wait," till——grapes grow on thorns, and figs on thistles.

A further cause of religious declension is found in the selection of unsatisfactory patterns of excellence. The measuring of themselves by themselves, with which an apostle charged the

members of the Corinthian church, 2 Cor. x. 12, is a perversity of judgment which has outlived that age. Too often, indeed, is this the only standard of comparison ; whereas, our obligation is, to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord, chap. vii. 1. In no branch of mental acquirement, is it likely that we shall much exceed our own expectations. Accordingly, if in religion we only anticipate failure, we shall probably realize little else.

Another reason has been somewhat anticipated in a former chapter ; but the point is too important to be omitted here. I allude now to the popular anticipation of this calamity, as a matter of course. The soul, under the hidings of God's face, has often been reminded of his sovereignty, and told to exercise faith, and patience, and hope, as to the return of brighter days ; whereas, the guilty absence of these very graces has, perhaps, occasioned the whole calamity. The friends of Job were wrong in their estimate of his character, for the power of discerning spirits was no necessary part of the prophetic office ; yet not only were they right in their general principles, but their sentiments were the language of divine inspiration. Hence, the force and justice of the

questions of Eliphaz,—“Are the consolations of God small with thee?—Is there any secret thing with thee?” Job xv. 11. The “secret thing” is usually the cause of all the mischief, and to detect and remove it, should be the first anxiety of the backslider. Forgetfulness of this simple fact, has given rise to an error which pervades and vitiates a large portion of our experimental theology. Volume upon volume has been written on the assumption that declension is a matter requiring sympathy rather than censure; and reasons have been sought for it in the sovereignty of God, which were far more likely to be found in the depravity of man. Of so objectionable a course, take the following, as a specimen.

“If we desire to feel less evil in us, than God suffers us to have, we may be assured that this desire proceeds, either from pride, seeking to glory in our own righteousness, or from an impatient wish to get rid of the trouble of striving always against sin; whereas, it should be enough for us, that God suffers it ——” a reason, truly, which may equally suffice to reconcile our minds to all the wretchedness and depravity in the universe. This astounding passage, than which a more dangerous one it

would be difficult to conceive, occurs in a book which has probably had a wider circulation, in the protestant world, than all other closet publications put together. Let the reader, who doubts my testimony, turn to Bogatzky's "Golden Treasury," at the section for the thirteenth of April.

Numerous instances, of a similar kind, might be adduced, from some of our most popular writers ; but I forbear. The venerated men, who have given utterance to such objectionable sentiments, would have been among the first to condemn them, had they perceived their tendency. The lesson we should learn from this circumstance, is to call no man "Master ;" but, with the Jews at Berea, to set an example to those in Thessalonica, Acts xvii. 11.

So little surprise does declension awaken, that Christians are accustomed to versify their doubts and fears, and to sing them instead of the praises of Zion. Some of our favourite hymns are constructed on this principle. Those beginning—" 'T is a point I long to know ;"—" Oh, for a closer walk with God !"—" Long have I sat beneath the sound of thy salvation ;"—and many others, are cases in point. I am not prepared to contend that this

course is improper; for, perhaps, it is too mournfully justified by circumstances, to require an apology. It is not even unscriptural, for the ancient church had its psalms of humiliation as well as of triumph, of mourning as well as of praise. But, if themes so distressing must be the subjects of our song, let us sing them in sackcloth and in ashes. Or, if we carry with us to the sanctuary no outward tokens of grief, let the downcast look, let the tearful eye, let the faltering lip, of the conscious backslider, bear witness there, that he means what he says, that he feels what he confesses, while he testifies the low estate of religion in his soul, and that he has not thoughtlessly taken up the strain of lamentation, as a matter of course; still less, that he imagines such acknowledgments satisfactory.

Confessions which, if true, would go far to annihilate all distinction between faith and unbelief, and to place, on the same level, the saint and the sinner, have inflicted immeasurable injury on the cause of religion, and have, probably, done more than anything else, to give the world a notion that "saint" is only a synonyme for "hypocrite." Christians cannot abound too much in humility; but it is no province of

humility to tell lies. And the whole truth is, that the average failings of the regenerate, partake of greater excellence than the highest virtues of the unconverted. Hence, the man who walks in the light of God's countenance, reproaches himself for matters in which others would see no harm, and confesses as sins the very things which they would make their boast. This circumstance, in fact, supplies the only ground on which some popular statements, of Christian imperfection, can be excused from the charge of falsehood.

In some quarters, a decay of vital godliness is, at present, attributable to the revival of ancient superstition. There, the truths of Christianity are supplanted by their symbols; and a pietism, which gave to the darkness of the middle ages its deepest shades, is even now attempting to eclipse the light of the nineteenth century. That worldly ecclesiastics, and persons of no religion, should readily welcome a system of rites and ceremonies, as an apology for the absence of experimental piety, is by no means surprising; but, that Christian men, of established reputation, should be so ensnared and deluded by these lying vanities, as to exchange the cross for the crucifix, is an event

which the religious world was hardly prepared to anticipate.

In addition to theological causes of declension, of which those already mentioned may suffice as a specimen, there are others, both of a religious and of a social kind, which cannot be omitted with justice to the subject of this essay.

It may be that the neglect of the Bible is one. All Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works, 2 Tim. iii. 16, 17. But, with all the veneration which, in religious circles, is paid to the sacred volume, it rarely occupies the place there to which it is entitled. Too often is it regarded as a holy charm, too seldom is it studied as the word of God. I have even known it used for purposes of divination ; and that not by ignorant fortune-tellers, but by persons who pass for intelligent Christians. Some, with whom I have met, have not been ashamed to acknowledge that, in cases of perplexity, they have betaken themselves to this expedient, in order to decide their course ; and more than one, have I found, whose as-

surance of hope for eternity appeared, at least in the first instance, to have been obtained in this very questionable way.

A respectable Christian, in a large and lucrative business, was suddenly seized with inflammation of the lungs. The disease so rapidly gained upon him, that his medical adviser thought it necessary to hint that, if he had any worldly affairs to settle, no time should be lost. "Hand me the Bible," he gasped. It was given him. On opening it, the seventeenth verse of the hundred and eighteenth psalm first met his eye. "Doctor," he resumed, "no will-making for me! I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord." But the issue proved that he was mistaken. In a few hours, he left his wife a widow, and his children orphans; and the bitterness of their grief was aggravated by the circumstance, that through the lack of a little information which he alone could supply, his affairs were left in such confusion, that the property, which would have sufficed for the maintenance of his family, was absorbed in litigation.

But, evils, far more distressing than even the destitution of the widow and the fatherless, have resulted from the misapplication or per-

version of Scripture ; for the soul has been the sufferer, and eternity the scene of anguish. False peace has been proclaimed to the enemies of God, and the “faithful saying” made the pretext of innumerable delusions. And, even in instances where the presence of saving faith has marked, to a certain extent, the docility of a mind under divine teaching, nevertheless has there been an amount of intellectual indolence, indicative of a low condition of intelligent piety. Perhaps, if auricular confession were practised among us, some would have to acknowledge that their daily closet reading of the Scriptures, seldom exceeds a psalm, or a few verses from the New Testament. Edification undoubtedly depends, not so much on the quantity read, as on the manner of reading it ; and no one will deny that, to a mind habituated to close thinking, a short passage may sometimes suggest a long train of profitable meditation. Occasionally, such a course may have its advantages. But, if we would learn the whole counsel of God, whatever he has thought proper to reveal we must account it our happiness to study. An absent friend would soon withhold from us all further correspondence, should it come to his knowledge that we leave

unread the greater portion of his letters. And we can hardly take a readier method of grieving the Holy Spirit, than to treat, with similar neglect, his gracious communications.

In the present day, and amidst the clearer views of Christian responsibility which are beginning to excite the attention of the religious world, it may not be undeserving of inquiry, whether there is not some danger of forgetting the indispensable necessity of special influence from Heaven, in order to the production and progress of piety in the soul. I am not quite sure that all the fears, which some have felt on this head, are justified by facts, and of this I am certain, that one, whose statements have been suspected of this tendency, would rather that his right hand should forget its cunning, than give utterance to anything which should even *seem* to question the declaration—"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts." But, as human nature is prone to extremes, it is well to be on our guard. Avoiding Scylla, let us beware of Charybdis. A spirit of slumber is bad, but a spirit of scepticism is incomparably worse.

Among the causes of religious declension, the imperfect sanctification of the sabbath must

not be forgotten. When man was doomed to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow, one day of respite, from that sentence, was allowed him every week. The very existence of such a provision, bespeaks the rest of heaven, and is a fitting preparation for its higher enjoyments. Accordingly, the sanctification of the sabbath is accounted a test of character, and of Christian profession. With open violations of that day, religious people are but little chargeable. But, where there is no gross infringement of its sacredness, there may be, nevertheless, an almost total loss of the blessings which it is calculated to secure. Many who would justly think it sinful to open an account book, or to read a newspaper, indulge in meditations, and perhaps in conversation too, which would better befit the exchange than the sanctuary. Of little use will it be to profess to keep holy the sabbath day, while such is the case. Speaking our own words is, to a certain extent, as irreconcilable with obedience then, as seeking our own pleasure, Isaiah lviii. 13 ; and the difference of the sin is, not in nature, but degree. And the man whose excuse is that he cannot spend a whole day at a time, in meditating and conversing on religion, only shows that

he has yet to learn its first principles. Shall it be easy to devote six days to the things of time, and hard to devote one to the things of eternity? In truth, then, the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.

One word here, as to the sabbath rights of servants ;—a matter on which the ancient law was remarkably explicit. “That thy manservant, and thy maidservant, may rest as well as thou,” Deut. v. 14, was the considerate and gracious provision of Him who spake “in the mount, out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness.” And, though we are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words, which voice they that heard, entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more, Heb. xii. 18, 19, yet it can hardly be imagined that Zion has less of tenderness than Sinai, or that the city of the living God has fewer immunities than had the church in the wilderness. Clearly, then, the religious rights of servants have not been set aside by the Christian dispensation. The merciful pro-

vision of Heaven comprehends all classes ; and on one day in the week, at least, the rich and the poor may forget their distinctions, in the presence of Him who is the Maker of them all. Moreover, servants have as little right to render, as their masters have to claim, unnecessary labour on the sabbath. No man can sell that of which he has no authority to dispose, without incurring the guilt of fraud or theft. And, when an individual undertakes to surrender his time to the service of another, a reservation should always be understood, as to that portion of it which belongs, not to him but to God.

No sabbath services, therefore, should be required, beyond the demands of necessity ; and, of that necessity, an enlightened conscience must be the judge. Some things, however, seem too obvious to require specification. To mention no more :—

When, on the sabbath, a Christian family walks to the sanctuary, over a threshold which their maidservant has been scouring that morning, or rides thither, leaving their manservant to pass his time, at the mews, the livery stables, or the public house, till his services are required to drive the carriage back again ;—or, guiltless of such a disregard of decency, quietly returns,

to enjoy the good cheer which some poor unfortunate has been preparing for their gratification, at the sacrifice, not only of everything like the sacredness of the sabbath, but also of that rest from labour which constitutes its lowest distinction, no marvel is it if little good comes of the public services of religion. A larger measure, that family could not justly have expected, had an apostle preached the sermon, and a seraph conducted their devotions.

Late hours of business have proved to many a fruitful source of spiritual wrong. When the tradesman remains at his counter, or the merchant at his counting-house, till nine, ten, eleven, and even twelve at night, neither private nor family prayer can receive due attention. For the former, perhaps, he can find an interval, during the early portion of the evening ;—and unless his heart is already engrossed with the cares of the world, which have choked the word and rendered it unfruitful, he will resolutely determine not to keep Heaven waiting, for his evening sacrifice, till past midnight ;—but what of the persons, in his employ, who can make no such provision, but must apply to business, even to the last ! And then, as to family worship ;—either omitted altogether, or scandal-

ously performed! I have seen it deferred until two in the morning, and one half of the assembled household asleep before it was over.

Oftentimes have Christians deeply injured their souls, by undue attention to secular occupations. That it is no part of religion to neglect these matters, is a fact too obvious for proof. But the danger is, lest they should gain such an ascendancy over the mind as to unfit it for divine communion. When piety is regarded as a secondary thing, as adapted only to fill some niche in the structure, or merely to be its crowning ornament,—“The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these”—is but an idle boast.

This remark will almost equally apply to the most sacred occupations. Religion itself may be secularized; and never, perhaps, was there greater need of caution, on that head, than at present. So delightfully multifarious are the claims of sanctified benevolence, that all who have a mind to work may find abundant occupation. But objects, in themselves purely religious, may be pursued under the influence of unhallowed rivalry. Even the sacrifices of righteousness may be kindled with unconsecrated fire. Whatever we attempt, to the

neglect of secret piety, we undertake to the damage of our own souls. It is well to comfort the afflicted, to instruct the ignorant, and to save the lost; but the pastor who labours so intently for the welfare of his flock that he has little time for closet prayer, as also the sabbath school teacher who hurries through his early devotions that he may not be too late for his class, will certainly find, that even successful effort, for the benefit of others, may be followed by the lamentation—"They made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept," Cant. i. 6.

The danger becomes yet greater, as the object of pursuit diverges from religion. And Christians have especial need, of redoubled watchfulness and prayer, when, for the promotion of general and benevolent objects, they are required to associate with persons with whom they have no further community of sentiment or feeling. Whatever may be its intent, habitual and familiar intercourse with "men of the world, who have their portion in this life," is highly prejudicial to vital godliness. It tends to divert the thoughts from the grand objects of faith and holiness, to render the mind less susceptible of religious impressions, and—worse than

all—to engender a feeling of self-complacency, at any real or imaginary distinction, between ourselves and them. We either descend to the level of those around us, till we meet their views and wishes ; or, affecting still to retain our elevation, we look proudly down on their poor specimens of excellence, and learn to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.

When uncongenial association arises out of providential circumstances, is forced upon us by necessity, and is wholly unsought by ourselves, we may expect special grace to enable us to withstand its temptations. But, when we rush into danger of our own accord, we shall inevitably make bitter work for repentance. In the case of an individual convert amidst an irreligious family, the very circumstance may be overruled for the production of watchfulness, and fervour, and consistency. The thought that unfriendly eyes are upon us, and that all our familiars watch for our halting, Jer. xx. 10, may render us doubly circumspect, lest we should realize their wishes, and give the enemy occasion to blaspheme. And the known opposition to piety, which pervades the circle in which we move, may, perhaps, supply a

valuable test, as to the integrity of our principles, when first we avow them. But, in the voluntary selection of friends, the matter is totally different. The Christian who seeks habitual intercourse with the worldly, the gay, and the irreligious, has little piety to lose, and will soon have less.

This evil is immeasurably augmented when the compact is for the dearest relationship in the world,—a relationship for life. To marry “only in the Lord,” 1 Cor. vii. 39, is a duty as binding on the faithful, as any other, in the whole code of Christian morals. Few, perhaps, will deny this position ; but then, the difficulty is, as to its application ; for, when passion empannels the jury, there is little hope that the verdict will be an impartial one. I have almost invariably found that the party, transgressing this statute of Christ, most solemnly disavows all such intention. The plea in justification is usually this ;—that the piety of the individual is unquestionable, although it has never been manifested by a public profession ; or, to take the lowest ground, that the person concerning whom the doubt is expressed, is in a hopeful condition of mind, and only wants a further introduction to a circle, strictly religious, in

order to come out boldly as a Christian. But, in reply, it may surely be urged, that conduct supplies our only test of character, and that if Christian people conceal the faith which they are bound to profess, they have no right to complain of injustice when they are treated as unbelievers.

The mischief often is, that attachments are formed in thoughtless haste, and then, perhaps, the error is discovered when retreat would be dishonourable. As a point in casuistry, it may be asked—What is to be done when the engagement is already made, and the parties are so far pledged to each other, that withdrawal would involve a breach of promise? Vows, undoubtedly, are solemn things; and the psalmist, when describing the character of the man who should abide in the tabernacle, and dwell in the holy hill of Zion, mentions this, as one of his qualifications, that he “swareth to his own hurt and changeth not,” Psalm xv. 4. But I know a good man, who will always rue the day when he incautiously applied that maxim, to an engagement, made before he was a Christian, and fulfilled afterwards, in a marriage speedily followed by separation under the most distressing and humiliat-

ing circumstances, such as have imbittered by far the greater portion of a lengthened lifetime, and which are now adding their pressure to the weight of declining years.

Of all human promises, that of marriage is the most sacred. No conceivable change of worldly condition, in either of the parties, can justify its violation. The promise of marriage, like the thing itself, is “for richer or poorer, for better or worse;” and the individual who treats it lightly, is an assassin who murders in the dark, or a fool who scatters firebrands, arrows, and death, and says—“Am not I in sport?” But, sacred as is the promise of marriage, there is something more sacred still,—and that is, the will of God, in Christ Jesus, concerning us. Let me ask the Christian reader, who demurs, what advice he would have given to the men who had vowed that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul, Acts xxiii. 12. Perhaps, he answers—that they had bound themselves to do an unlawful act, and that therefore the sin would be less in the breach of their vow than in its observance. Admitted. But who shall say that the cases are dissimilar? The one act, is as truly a violation of the law of Christ, as is the other. And, if we plead for

the infringement of sacred precepts, where shall we stop? Each will have some favourite sin which he will endeavour to excuse, and mere caprice will supersede all moral obligation.

But, supposing the parties married—What is to be done? Clearly nothing, but to make the best they can of a ruinous bargain. They must do as they would if the one had found that the other was insolvent, and that marriage had involved liabilities which, at one fell swoop, had taken away all provision for the future, leaving them destitute, houseless, and hopeless. The mischief is done, and cannot be undone. The best plan, under such circumstances, is to look at the evil calmly, and to take the only precaution left, against calamities still more appalling. Let then the religious professor, who finds himself the husband of an unconverted wife, at once confess his fault, in some such language as the following :

“ Well, my dear, we are married ; and marriage is for life. The question now must be—Is it for death as well?—eternal death, I mean. I have ascertained that you have no religion. I might have known it sooner, had mine been worthier of the name. But I know it now, and you make no secret of the matter.

The question therefore is—What is to become of us both? I feel that the feeble piety to which alone I can pretend, will be utterly overpowered and destroyed by the counteracting influence of your worldliness and irreligion. Therefore, unless you will resolve to be saved, the prospect is that we shall perish together.”

Far different would be the circumstances, and for that reason, the conduct, of individuals converted in after life. Where one is taken, and the other is left, the utmost tenderness and forbearance will be required to recommend and enforce the religion of Christ. I have known instances, not a few, where, on the one side there was devoted piety, and on the other, the stupidity of indifference, or the recklessness of unbelief. In such a case, the sufferer deserves our pity; but, in the former instance, never can the erring party assume a position which would render counsel endurable, until with contrition of heart, a full acknowledgment be made, both of the sin and its consequences. Otherwise, the individual addressed, would of course retort—“Physician, heal thyself! One who could like me well enough to marry me, could hardly think that there was so much amiss.”

On the subject of unequal marriages, I have

thought it necessary to be the more explicit, because I happen to know that some remarks of mine, which appeared, a few years since, in one of our religious periodicals, have been strangely misunderstood, and have even been cited in justification of a course which I would be among the last to defend or excuse.

Religious declension may, in some instances, not unjustly be ascribed to the frequency and love of company. There is nothing in the Bible to forbid the charities of life. On the contrary, we are even commanded to "use hospitality, one to another, without grudging," 1 Peter iv. 9. But then, we have also another law, which is equally binding—"Whether, therefore, ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God," 1 Cor. x. 31. It can hardly be supposed that Christian people are in the habit of such promiscuous companionship as merges all distinction between the church and the world. In every circle of society, there must be some line of segregation. And surely that which the psalmist has drawn, Psalm cxix. 63, and which Christianity has sanctioned, 2 Cor. vi. 14, is the most reasonable and the most obvious. I will not deny that I have heard of social gatherings where

this rule is utterly forgotten. I have even been assured that men professing godliness, have entertained a circle of acquaintance, so far removed from all pretence to piety, that they separated without family worship, the reason assigned, for such an omission, being the incongruity of such a service in so mixed a company. Of things like these, I have heard, but I cannot say that I have seen them. My conviction is that, if they exist at all, they are only found in the instance of persons whose apostasy from godliness has already proceeded to such a length, that should they abandon religious society altogether, the loss would be exclusively their own.

Few occurrences, in this imperfect world, are more delightful than the familiar and confiding intercourse of those whose identity of Christian character affords a pledge that their friendship will be renewed in heaven. But, even in their case, converse to be mutually profitable, must be of that order which the prophet Malachi describes ;—it must bear to be written in the book of God's remembrance, Mal. iii. 16. How little of that which passes in Christian circles is worthy of such a record, let those, who are most familiar with our best society, bear witness.

Sometimes, indeed, the social party becomes an occasion of mutual profit and of holy gladness ; but, in general, its highest recommendations are rather of a negative kind, so that the retiring guest may well account it a matter of thanksgiving, to have been there, without having done, or suffered, any harm. The blame of disappointment, on such occasions, is often laid to the pastors of the flock, even when they little deserve it. They are justly expected to be "blameless," and "of good behaviour," and while "given to hospitality," to be "apt to teach," 1 Tim. iii. 2. But it is more than man can do, to lead when none will follow. Hence, seasonable and important topics are hastily dismissed, and the time which is allotted to social converse is grievously consumed in trifling conversation ; so that when, at last, the Bible is brought, and the bell is rung, and the servants are summoned, for family worship, too often does it seem like a forlorn attempt to sanctify, with the word of God and with prayer, the frivolities of a most unprofitable evening.

A page, yet darker, must conclude this chapter ; for the melancholy catalogue would be incomplete without the mention of a still more fearful cause of religious defection than

any that has yet been specified. I now allude to fictitious conversion, a case of which almost every religious society can supply some examples. "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would, no doubt, have continued with us," 1 John ii. 19. Transient impressions were mistaken for a change of heart, or reformation of conduct for "newness of life." The confidence thence arising, stood for a while, but afterwards proved to have been misplaced.

Some have thought, that instances of this description, more frequently occur in seasons of special prosperity, than at any other time; on the ground, that natural sympathy with real conversion, tends to produce its unreal similitude. The supposition is plausible; but, so far as my observation has gone, facts are against it. Of those who apostatize from the faith, the vast majority will be found to consist of persons who, from early training, association, or example, gradually, and almost imperceptibly, embraced a religious profession, the maintenance of which depended on little else than the absence of temptation. At length, temptation came, and profession vanished.

But, under whatever circumstances apostasy

may occur, it is not necessary to contend that, in every instance, the parties were hypocrites. It may have been that they were only self-deceivers, and that the imposition, which they practised on others, had first deluded their own souls. Perhaps, they were really impressed at the time ; perhaps, others not more powerfully affected than themselves have proved the genuineness of their conversion by lives of faith and holiness ; perhaps, some of them have closed a happy life by a happier death ; and—why should the sincerity of these, their companions in awakening, have been questioned or denied ? No reason was either found or suspected. They were welcomed, with the rest, as friends and brethren ; but they entered the marriage feast, without the wedding garment, Matt. xxii. 11.

CHAPTER IV.

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION, AS TO ITS CONSEQUENCES.

INTERWOVEN with all the causes which have been set forth in the preceding chapter, and oftentimes concealed so dexterously as to escape observation, runs a tissue of infernal temptation. Our adversary the devil, who as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour, 1 Peter v. 8, adapts his stratagems to all conceivable circumstances ; and, if we are ignorant of his devices, we shall not long escape them.

The consequences, therefore, of religious declension, are precisely those which a malignant spirit would most desire. Of these, there are some which relate to the individual, and others which extend to society ; some which afflict the church, and others which desolate the world ; some which overshadow the inte-

rests of time, and others which cast a deeper shade on the visions of eternity.

To begin with those which concern the individual,—the destitution of essential happiness is one. Often has the backslider lost the enjoyment of religion, and pierced himself through with many sorrows, even before he began to apprehend his downward progress. Some sudden revelation of his character has brought to light a paucity of resources, a defection of experience, an unpreparedness for trial, wholly incompatible with a prosperous condition of piety. Perhaps, at the very season when the consolations of religion were needed, in all their power and glory, to counterbalance the decay of nature, and to maintain successfully the last strife of mortality, there has been detected a lack of resources, a disappointment of hope, a failure of faith, all but ruinous ; and the parting testimony, which under other circumstances might have been instructive, and satisfactory, and encouraging to survivors, has rather ministered doubt, and gloom, and uncertainty.

The following is a case in point.

Under somewhat remarkable circumstances which it is unnecessary to explain, a young

man, whose former character had been anything but satisfactory, was seemingly brought to God. Like Manasseh among the thorns, amidst a series of providential visitations, he wakened up to the claims of religion, and found consolation and hope. For a considerable period his conduct attested his sincerity, and his rapid progress in experimental religion, brought, to the minds of many, the declaration of our Lord—"There are last, which shall be first; and there are first, which shall be last." At length, however, it became evident, to those who knew him best, that his piety was on the wane, and that, with him, growth in grace had become a thing of by-gone days. Still, there was nothing exceptionable in his general deportment. He always filled his place in the sanctuary; in the progress of religion, at home and abroad, he manifested an unabated interest; and in liberality and benevolence he was an example to others. But, as to spirituality of mind, there was a marked and evident declension.

About this time, and in the midst of increasing prosperity, he was overtaken by an affliction which, after a long course of alternation and anxiety, threatened a fatal issue. At this crisis, he inquired of me one day when I called to see

him, whether I had of late been satisfied with his religious character. My reply was such as he anticipated. "Ah," said he, "I have often felt that you suspected me, and I have deserved to feel it, for I am a miserable backslider." He then stated his conviction that the time of his departure was at hand; and, thinking it probable that we might never meet again, he expressed a wish to avail himself of that opportunity, to disclose the secret history of his religious profession. "I never intended," he said, "to mention it to mortal ear; and you are the only person to whom I shall tell the mournful tale. You will know how to use it, as a warning to others, when I am forgotten.

"When I was converted, ——." Here he became unable to proceed, and hiding his face with his hands, wept bitterly. After a considerable interval, he resumed—"Yes, I *was* converted, when I professed to be converted. I was perfectly sincere at the time; and now, yes, even now, I have a trembling hope which I would not barter for the universe. When I was converted, I resolved to devote three hours, every day of my life, to meditation and prayer. And, for more than a year, I kept my promise. I spent an hour in devotion, every morning,

before I left my room ; and again, before I retired to rest ; and, that I might not offer to God that which cost me nothing, or pray when I was unfit for such an exercise, I usually selected an early part of the evening for that purpose. And, more than this, amidst all the cares and anxieties of my arduous profession, I managed, by good contrivance, to save another hour, for the same purpose, either at once or at intervals, in the middle of the day.

“At that time, I was a happy man. And these repeated services, so far from proving a weariness to the flesh, were the joy and the rejoicing of my heart. Instead of finding them tedious, time never fled so swiftly as when I spent it in my closet. In fact, I longed for the intervening hours to depart, that I might be free to go thither again. But, at length, the spirit of the world came over me, and I began to calculate how much I was losing by all this devotion. This was an easy task, as in my case time was money. And then, I flattered myself that the more I could obtain, the more I should be enabled to contribute to the cause of God. Moreover, in looking round the church, I saw many maintaining a respectable profession of religion, who probably never spent an

hour in their closets at any one period of their lives. And I began to think that I might be able to keep my ground just as well as they. Accordingly, I made the attempt, and limited each service to three quarters of an hour. After I had pursued this plan, for six months or more, I endeavoured to persuade myself that I was nothing the worse for the change. I then took courage to proceed yet further, and reduced each service to half an hour. But, my course was still from bad to worse ; and though I never, from the first day until now, have, during ordinary circumstances, neglected to retire for prayer,—morning, noon, and night,—at last, my devotions became so cold and my soul so lifeless, that I have, many a time, felt glad when the service was over, and my conscience was laid to rest. And now, I am going into the presence of Him who died for me ; and, what shall I say there ? Oh, my poor, unprofitable life !”

He paused, and again he wept. I endeavoured to remind him that the acceptance of a sinner, and even the justification of a saint, depends not on the length or fervour of his prayers, nor on the value of his services, but on his faith in the great sacrifice for transgres-

sion—"the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." He knew this, as well as I could tell him, for he was no novice in theology; but still he exclaimed—"Oh, my unprofitable life! all gone, wasted, thrown away!" As I left him, he added, and these were the last words I ever heard him utter,— "I have finished my course, but I cannot say that I have kept the faith." A few days afterwards, he died.

I have not published this incident for the purpose of recommending the plan of praying by task-work. But caution is seldom necessary in that direction. And, whatever may be our views, as to the seasons and method of prayer, the man who cherishes the hope that his soul can prosper and be in health without a large measure of private devotion, may as well persuade himself that his next discovery will bring to light the phoenix, the griffin, or the salamander. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for, whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," Gal. vi. 7. "They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind," Hosea viii. 7.

It is impossible to know much of the religious world, without observing the fact, that only a very small measure of happiness is commonly

associated with Christian profession. Just enough of the consolations of God, to sustain them under the cares and burdens of life, is all that the faithful, in general, seem to attain or desire. "Joy unspeakable and full of glory," such as the primitive disciples were wont to realize amidst their "manifold temptations," 1 Peter i. 8, they regard as exclusively the product of another sphere, and so they content themselves to wait for it, till that which is perfect shall come, and that which is in part shall be done away.

Desertion is the loss of happiness, but in a more aggravated form, and as a positive infliction resulting from divine displeasure. It is one of the many ways in which God gives his saints to see how evil and how bitter a thing it is to forsake him, Jer. ii. 19. Whatever of real enjoyment belongs to religion, springs from his presence. With him is the fountain of life, and in his light they see light, Psalm xxxvi. 9. When, therefore, he hides his face, they are troubled. When he withdraws the sunshine of his love, they walk in darkness. Some would regard this infliction as the issue of mere sovereignty; but, since God does not willingly afflict nor grieve the children of men, Lam. iii.

33, it is well to inquire—Is there not a cause? Whatever may be the case in particular instances of mental depression or constitutional infirmity, as a general rule, desertion is attributable to declension, and has with it precisely the same connexion which usually subsists between sin and suffering.

Another consequence of backsliding, is probably the loss—and possibly the contented loss—of usefulness. When our own condition is unsatisfactory, we are not likely to do much for the benefit of others; and the little we attempt, will be of too cold and feeble a character, to warrant the hope of success. We cannot be too careful to remember that neither is he, that planteth, anything, nor he, that watereth; but, at the same time, we must not forget, that when *Paul* planted, and *Apollos* watered, God gave the increase, 1 Cor. iii. 6. For this reason, if Christian husbandry, in our hands, is unproductive, it behoves us to try some other methods. Or, to speak plainly, and without a proverb, if sinners cease to be converted, and saints established, through our instrumentality, it is high time for us to examine afresh the evidences of our own discipleship.

When the religious professor can satisfy him-

self with an unproductive Christianity, it is not unlikely that circumstances, which at other seasons would excite no notice, will be assigned as reasons for standing aloof from every undertaking which requires some little amount of self-denial. Hence, perhaps, he pleads—offence, when had the real cause been stated, it would have been—declension. The individual has retired from united effort, under the pretence that he could not bear the obstinacy of one, the dictation of another, or the ill temper of a third ; whereas, if the whole truth were told, he would have to confess, that he has ceased to serve the Saviour, because he has ceased to love him.

Whatever may be the reason, the fact is undeniable ;—that multitudes who would think themselves deeply wronged to have their piety called in question, are doing nothing, or almost nothing, for Him to whom true discipleship would constrain them to devote their bodies, souls, and spirits. Meanwhile, though Christian charity may induce their brethren to take the most favourable view of their conduct, the world, understanding no such thing, will not only think them guilty of hypocrisy, but will disregard the truth, because they only half believe it.

Distressing as are these results, they are immeasurably aggravated when the individual happens to be a teacher of others. When the pastors become brutish, the flocks are scattered, Jer. x. 21. Nor is this the worst ; for it may be that the scattered flock will find pasturage elsewhere. Or, to drop the figure, the sanctuary may be forsaken, and yet the worshippers may not be lost to the church of God. The mischief is, in this case, comparatively small ; for bare walls and empty benches are insusceptible of moral contamination. But, the more awful probability is, that the ordained backslider keeps up an unsullied reputation, retains the attachment and confidence of his people, and so, preaches and prays and visits them down—to his own level, till, at last, they love to have it so, and should a man of another spirit cross their path occasionally, he must expect to receive about the same measure of courtesy that the legion of devils, at Gadara, bestowed upon his Master—“ Let us alone ! What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth ? ”

Declension, when once it enters a church, soon spreads. Young converts take the character of their piety from those who were in Christ

before them ; and, partly from real modesty, and partly from infirmity of judgment, they hesitate to go beyond the line of things, thus made ready to their hand.

Hence, the distressingly unproductive character of average Christianity ; and also, the still more alarming fact, that anything, a little in advance of the piety of the times, is regarded with astonishment. A man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, is thought a prodigy. And, an individual, especially if found in private life, who has saved from death some twenty or thirty souls, is almost taken for one of the prophets, or John the Baptist, risen from the dead.

All honour to the servants of Christ who are faithful to their Lord ! Let not a word escape which shall cast over their characters, or their services, the shadow of depreciation ! God approves and rewards their labour, and angels stand admiring by, while the signs which follow, testify that their commission is divine. To share their fellowship, and even to sit at their feet, is no mean distinction. But, how comes it to pass, that this honourable band includes so few, even of those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity ? Another question, more

humiliating still, may possibly occur—How is it that we are not among their number?—or, (to specify particulars,—) that we can regard the perdition of our fellow creatures with indifference?—that we can gaze on the millions and hardly notice their march to everlasting death?—that while we enter our closets and pray for ourselves with tolerable fervour, the condition of the world, the expectations of Christ, the progress of his kingdom, and the ultimate subjection of the nations to the sceptre of his dominion, are only things of faint perception and of distant hope? We behold the transgressors, but where is our grief? We acknowledge their doom, but where is our pity? We approach the footstool of mercy, to make intercessions for all men, but where is the mighty wrestling of a soul in earnest?—the agony of supplication?—in a word—“the effectual fervent prayer” which God *may* answer without teaching his creatures to think lightly of his service, or to imagine that the merest formalism is all that he requires?

Thus far, the consequences, which have been described, are those which arise from inefficiency rather than irreligion. I would now advert to some of another class—the disgraceful falls of

religious professors, in the tendency which they have, to neutralize the force of truth, and to give the enemy occasion to blaspheme.

Assuredly, no one can be justified in deriving from cases, even of the most flagrant apostasy, an argument for the ruin of his own soul. Yet, foolish and desperate as such a course must be, it is taken day by day continually, to the dishonour of truth and the discredit of religion. And this is nothing new. Even in the apostolic age, there were some, by reason of whom, the way of truth was "evil spoken of," 2 Peter ii. 2, and others, through whom, the name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles, Rom. ii. 24.

It is somewhat difficult to imagine by what perversity of argument the enemies of godliness arrive at the conclusions which they pretend to draw from cases of religious apostasy. It would seem, indeed, as though they imagined that Christianity undertakes to confer, on all its disciples, a patent of moral infallibility; and, that if this infallibility can only be disproved, Christianity itself, as a natural and necessary consequence, is disproved as well, and that therefore they may venture to set its sanctions at defiance.

But the very basis of this reasoning is gratuitous. Christianity professes to impart no such thing. It is a system of facts and influences, of means and motives ; and the success, or failure, of the whole, must depend on its individual reception. "Wherewithal," inquires the psalmist, "shall a young man cleanse his way?" and then replies—"By taking heed thereto according to thy word," Psalm cxix. 9. But, the line of argument, now under consideration, goes upon the assumption that a young man, who refuses to take heed according to this word, by that very act may prove that this word has no tendency to make him cleanse his way. Was ever impiety more unreasonable, or fiction more preposterous ! And then, the injustice of making the exception the rule ! But such is the fact. A thousand may believe, to the saving of the soul ; but, if only one should draw back unto perdition, the faith of all the rest is to be held as worthless.

The men of the world are too wise in their generation to reason thus in relation to the common transactions of life. They never think it a sufficient ground for despising all mercantile pursuits, that occasionally a firm of good repute finds its way into the gazette. The cir-

cumstance that commercial confidence sometimes proves to have been unfounded, may make them cautious in relation to individual security; but, as men of business, they know full well, that a few isolated cases have little influence on public credit; and, that were it otherwise, trade would soon cease altogether. And, the religious question they would regard in the same light, were it not that they have a motive there, for making the worst of everything. Let some dealer in the market, or some merchant on the exchange, not only prove himself unworthy of confidence, but by consummate villany expose himself to public execration, yet the disgrace, deep as it is, shall be exclusively his own, and those whom he leaves behind, "at the receipt of custom," shall all be honourable men, notwithstanding. But, let a reputed Christian dishonour his profession, and then these very men (who would treat with indignation any attempt to confound their names, or to identify their credit, with the former transaction,) will maintain that the religious apostate is only a fair sample of the rest, and that all who make a profession similar to that which he has dishonoured and relinquished, are hypocrites and knaves. But, do they believe it?

If they do not,—What shall we say for their honesty?—if they do,—What, for their understanding?

But, unjust and fallacious as are all such deductions, their injustice and fallacy are nothing in favour of the man who occasioned them. He knew, beforehand, that such would be the result of his delinquency, and therefore he is chargeable with all the mischief which, in this or any other way, his fall may produce. The men who take occasion from his conduct, to trifle with the religion which he has abandoned, unless they repent, will die in their iniquity; but their blood will be required at his hand. Many a dishonoured name, has gone down to the grave, laden with the imprecations of the lost. And, should the memory of the apostate be thought worthy of a tombstone, the most fitting inscription would be the memorial of Achan—"That man perished not alone in his iniquity," Joshua xxii. 20. His conduct, perhaps, has inflicted on the neighbourhood where he dwelt, a curse, which a whole generation will hardly suffice to remove.

The final consequences of declension comprehend a world where God has forgotten to be gracious, and in anger has shut up his tender

mercies. Many have found their way to hell, who once bid fair for heaven. And, among the regrets of eternity, some of the most poignant, are those which result from obliterated impressions, stifled convictions, and broken vows. Well is the spot remembered, from which a last look was intended to be taken, at those fond attractions which fire from heaven was threatening to devour. And, a last look indeed it was; for the loiterer perished there, Luke xvii. 32.

But, short of that world of misery, the results of declension are so destructive and so multifarious, that to describe and specify them all, would be at once a hopeless and an endless task. To nothing else can we ascribe that alienation of heart among the disciples of Christ, which unfits them for mutual fellowship, and holy co-operation. Hence arises, moreover, one of the greatest impediments to the progress of religion; for if, as it would seem, the world is to receive their testimony only as they love one another, the present probability, of its immediate conversion, is reduced to an infinitesimal fraction of hope.

Still, the prospect is not one of unmitigated gloom. Across the darkness which overhangs

the hill of Zion, there are yet some gleams of sunshine ; and the breaking cloud bespeaks a brighter day. We have need for lamentation, but not for despondency ; for humiliation, but not for despair. Religion, on the whole, is not losing ground. Instead of the fathers, shall be the children ; and, after them, another generation.

But, shall all the energies of the church be consumed in keeping pace with the grave ? Shall all that is done avail for nothing more than filling up the death-vacancies of the faithful ? If so, when shall the religion of the cross become the religion of the world ? Hell reckons its victims by millions, and each succeeding century consigns to the bottomless pit an augmented number of human souls. We stand between the living and the dead. The cries and groans of the perishing are borne on every breeze. The victims of the second death meet us in all directions. With the plague-spot upon their brow, they crowd our streets, they frequent our sanctuaries, they enter our dwellings. And, when shall the pestilence be stayed ? Never,—till the church shall put away iniquity. Never,—till Christians themselves, breaking down under a sense of bloodguiltiness, and mourning

each apart, shall commence their discipleship afresh at the cross. Never,—till the whole body of believers shall become *one*; one for affection, one for compassion, and one for devotedness.

CHAPTER V.

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION, AS TO ITS REMEDIES.

GOD has methods, of healing the backslidings of his people, which are not at our command. In his hand, even the ordinary arrangements of providence may be made to assume a special character, such as to say—"Hast thou not procured this unto thyself?" Jer. ii. 17.

Perhaps, the man had pleaded commercial prosperity, as a reason for neglecting his closet, his Bible, and his God. And, the allegation was too true, for the world was bidding fair to extinguish the last spark of religion in his soul. An unexpected blow brings down his proud imaginations. It renders him a bankrupt, but it saves him from perdition.

Or, peradventure, his family had sufficed to place him in peril. As he looked proudly round upon the little ones whose fingers had entangled his very heartstrings, he thought it well to neglect everything for *them*. Amidst the

hurry of business, it was *his family* that rendered him the greedy, grasping, worldling that he was. And, when he had retreated thence, to his own fireside, it was *his family* that robbed him of the little space, which otherwise he could have contrived to find, for meditation and private prayer. Such, at least, was his persuasion. He knew that his piety was declining ; and this was the reason, which he assigned to himself, for its decrease. That hinderance now exists no longer. The visitation of God has left him a silent nursery. Bereft and desolate, he follows the last of his offspring to the grave. As the earth falls heavily on the coffin-lid and claims its kindred dust, let him hail the stroke which sets him free !—free to hold communion with Heaven,—free to live for the life to come !

Or, perhaps, the buoyancy of health had become a snare. An unbounded flow of spirits gave rise to the indulgence of levity ; and amidst the security and comfort by which the man was surrounded, it seemed to him that his mountain stood strong, and that he would never be moved, Psalm xxx. 6, 7. Meanwhile his calculations for the future were rather those of worldly ambition than of Christian enterprise. Assuring himself of lengthened life and undecaying health,

he laid his plans for everything but holy service. As to secular matters, he was a pattern of promptitude ; but when the claims of religion were concerned, the obligations of the day were usually left to the opportunities of the morrow. He acknowledged himself a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, but he was always going to begin to serve him. Notwithstanding his religious profession, his home was dearer than the sanctuary, and his cash-book more precious than the Bible. Earthly things had so engrossed his thoughts, that he was unwilling to lose sight of them for a moment. When the returning sabbath demanded that he should forget them for a season, he made the attempt ; but it was so painful an effort, that when he said—" Abide ye here, and I will go yonder and worship,"—he said it less cheerfully than Abraham did when his son was to be the sacrifice. And then, perhaps, a latent wish, too sad for contemplation, even in a mind like his, and too profane for utterance within the precincts of the sanctuary, would, had it been allowed to express itself in words, have suggested the inquiry—" When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn ? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat ?" Amos viii. 5. But times are

altered now. Health is a snare no longer, for God has taken it away. In such an instance, severe as the discipline may be, it is evidently sent in mercy ; and whatever may have been the method of his restoration, happy is the backslider who can adopt the declaration of the psalmist—"Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept thy word," Psalm cxix. 67.

Public calamities may occasionally fulfil a similar design. When the churches have settled down into inglorious repose, or have wasted their energies in mutual contentions, the providence of God, may awaken them to diligence, or restore them to faith and unity, by judgments which shall make the earth to tremble. Amidst surrounding desolation, "the pestilence that walketh in darkness," or "the destruction that wasteth at noonday," may yet convey the gracious invitation—"Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee : hide thyself, as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast," Isaiah xxvi. 20.

Sometimes, however, by gentler means than these, the Father of mercies condescends to call back again, to confidence and joy, his forgetful

and disobedient children. He heals their backslidings, and loves them freely, Hosea xiv. 14. In such instances, the Holy Spirit, perhaps in connexion with his word and ordinances, but possibly without any other perceptible agency than his own, imparts to the soul those apprehensions of divine truth, and those views of redeeming love, which produce an alteration there, not unlike a second conversion. Cases have occurred where this has been accomplished so strikingly, that the individual has doubted, ever afterwards, whether previously to this apparent revival of his piety, he ever knew the grace of God in truth.

A good man, inclined to this opinion of himself, once told me, that though for several years, he had thought himself a Christian, and had passed for one, he had never, till recently, known what it was to do "the will of God from the heart." He had, indeed, done many things, because he thought that he ought to do them. But still there had always been a feeling of reluctance, a painful sense of self-denial, about his piety, and this to an extent which more enlightened perceptions of religious obligation had induced him to regard as incompatible with genuine discipleship.

It can hardly excite surprise that when the soul which has wandered from God, awakes to a consciousness of its guilt and danger, alarm should sometimes exclude all hope. In one view, the backslider is susceptible of a livelier consciousness of misery than even the unconverted. In the case of a man who has felt the power of the world to come, destitution carries with it a sense of forfeiture; and, if only on the ground that it is more grievous to have lost a thing than never to have had it, better is it not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn aside from the holy commandment, 2 Peter ii. 21.

But, since the Gospel is the product of infinite wisdom, it provides for every possible emergency; and, since the present is a world of mercy, no sinner, and therefore no backslider, has occasion to despair. So long as there is a consciousness of misery, and a disposition to flee from the wrath to come, the condition of no living transgressor is absolutely hopeless. Moreover, the Shepherd of Israel, Psalm lxxx. 1, that good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, John x. 15, has made especial provision to restore poor wanderers to his fold. He, who understood our nature so thoroughly,

as not to need that any should testify to him concerning man, chap. ii. 25, knew full well, how difficult it would be to convince the awakened mind that there is forgiveness with God, that he may be feared, and that, with him, there is plenteous redemption, Psalm cxxx. 4, 7 ; and therefore, among the invitations of his mercy, we find everything that is persuasive in argument, Hosea ii. 7, and tender in affection, Jer. xxxi. 20, and inspiring in hope, Luke xv. 20. Quotations, almost sufficient in themselves to constitute a common-place-book of the Bible, might be adduced to prove this point. Remonstrances, warnings, entreaties, invitations, and promises, addressed to those who have destroyed themselves, Hosea xiii. 9, by forsaking their own mercies, Jonah ii. 8, comprise no inconsiderable portion of both the Old and New Testament.

That the individual backslider may participate these blessings, let him review the past. This is, perhaps, an unwelcome task ; but God requires it, Haggai i. 5 ; Rev. ii. 5. The infliction might have been far heavier. It might have comprehended the entire of life, as in the case of the rich man in hell, Luke xvi. 25. Why, then, should a living man complain, a

man for the punishment of his sins? Lam. iii. 39. Whatever may be the pain, or difficulty, of the attempt, unless he would abandon all hope of restoration, and give himself up for lost, the backslider must consent to think upon his ways; and the sooner he brings himself to that exercise the safer. He must think of his early vows, of the day of his espousals, of the gladness of his young discipleship, and of the hopes which his incipient course excited in the minds of the faithful. He must remember—how once, in his heavenward pilgrimage, he bid fair to outstrip most who were in Christ before him;—how the ardour of his zeal sufficed to render the ordinary dulness of piety the more evident and the less tolerable;—how, from his brighter example, many even of the saints took occasion to acknowledge their unprofitableness, and to “renew their strength;” while, through his instrumentality, sinners received the word with gladness, yielded their hearts to Christ, and pressed into the kingdom of heaven.

Supposing he has no such recollections, let him rather ask, whether he has ever known the grace of God in truth, or whether the whole of his religious profession has been anything better than one perpetual lie. But, provided

he can go the length already mentioned, let him, without delay, proceed yet further.

Next, then, must pass in review before him, the circumstances which lowered the tone of his piety ;—how the friendship of men supplanted communion with God ;—how the cares of the world choked the word and rendered it unfruitful ;—how his days were wasted in the pursuit of vanity ;—how he restrained prayer before God, till for the closet he had so little time, and for the sanctuary so little inclination, that when “ the hour of prayer ” returned, it returned not for him ;—how he went, from bad to worse, till the Scriptures lost their interest, and the very cross its glory, while, taking as his standard the opinions of men instead of the true sayings of God, he began to account himself, with all his defection, a paragon of excellence, and to imagine that he might lawfully remit a measure of his services.

Remit a measure of his services ! To whom, then, were those services professedly rendered ? “ The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” Under what specific acknowledgment ? That of personal and individual obligation, arising not merely from providential blessings, but also from the posses-

sion and enjoyment of redeeming grace. And, what was their aggregate amount? A feeble expression of his thankfulness. And, what their ultimate direction? Just that, without which, human life, at its best estate, is altogether vanity.

Amidst these recollections, how shall he attempt to justify his conduct, or what shall he urge in arrest of judgment! Shall he cite the world to share his punishment? Nay, verily! that world is condemned already, John iii. 19. Shall he require his associates to bear a portion of his guilt? Vain the demand! they have yet to answer for their own, and "none of them can, by any means, redeem his brother, or give to God a ransom for him," Psalm xlix. 7. Or, shall he say that the sanctuary, and the sabbath, and the Bible, are not the same that they used to be? If not, why not? Whatever the difference, he has occasioned it. The sanctuary, peradventure, has the identical ministry that it used to have; and assuredly the sabbath numbers as many hours, and the Bible as many chapters, as in years gone by. The only alteration is with himself. Nor, is it strange that, in this case, even prayer should have lost its power; for he has not, because he

asks not, he asks and receives not, because he asks amiss, James iv. 2, 3.

Let, then, the backslider cease to lay the blame on circumstances, or to charge his criminality on any but himself. Humiliation, sincere and heartbroken humiliation, before God and man, is the only course that can avail him now. While he cherishes the slightest propensity to extenuate his guilt, his restoration is impossible. The very disposition, which would plead excuses for sin, is at once the result and the indication, of a conscience and a heart, unawakened and unsubdued. So generally is this the case, as to form a test, of character, all but universal; the only exceptions being those which result from religious ignorance or mental imbecility. The holiness of God, and the sinfulness of man, the reasonableness of the law, and the unreasonableness of transgression, are subjects so apparent to an enlightened mind, that, whatever may be the case with those who are deficient in information or understanding, no man of intelligence has a right to dismiss, from his personal apprehensions, the fear of hell, who does not wonder that he is not already there.

Contrition is the first proof of humiliation,

and confession is the next; and, till the one accompanies the other, either will be in vain. Confession, apart from contrition, was the disgrace of the Israelites in the wilderness; for, while "they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer, nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues, for their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant," Psalm lxxviii. 35—37. And contrition, apart from confession, was the misery of the psalmist, while his bones waxed old, through his roaring all the day long. Relief was found at last, and he tells us how it came. "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin," Psalm xxxii. 5.

But, while confession before God is acknowledged as imperative and indispensable, it may yet deserve inquiry whether the backslider is not bound to proceed, yet further, in the way of humiliation. The law of Christ requires that we should confess our faults "one to another," James v. 16. Still, it may become a question, how far such confession should be

carried. As the design of Christian discipline is the correction rather than the punishment of the offender, where restoration is accomplished confession may be unnecessary. Some things, perhaps, are best in oblivion. The secret fault which has never awakened suspicion, and from which God has already cleansed the soul, hardly comes within the intention of this statute. But should the fact transpire, intentional concealment, even of that sin, (to say nothing of its denial,) will be incompatible with restoration. The grand matter, however, is to make full confession before God, and at his footstool to lay open the whole heart; whereas in the absence of this surrender, confession of every other kind will be utterly unavailing.

Nevertheless, is it to be apprehended, that in many cases, people have a notion that to confess their sin to a fellow creature, and especially to a Christian minister, frees them from guilt. I was once placed in somewhat perplexing circumstances, as to this matter. A man on his death-bed, (no backslider, truly, but one whose whole life, and that a very protracted one, had been a course of irreligion,) wished to disburden his conscience of a heavy load, in order, as the phrase is, to die happy.

I had reason to apprehend, that had that confession been made, it would have laid me under the necessity of divulging the matter to the nearest magistrate, or have implicated me, as accessory after the fact, in a case of murder. I therefore besought him to withhold the disclosure. Whatever his crime might be, God, I told him, had provided but one remedy,—the blood which cleanseth from all sin ; and therefore I would only treat him as I would any other perishing sinner, conscious of condemnation and desirous of pardon. At his earnest request, I visited him repeatedly ; with what effect the day must declare. I have seen too much of sick-bed conversions to regard them with confidence. He expressed a hope of forgiveness ; but, whether that hope was realized, I must leave. The secret of his guilt went down with him to the grave.

Little is it likely that the backslider will have to confess sins which lie within the province of the magistrate. He may, however, find it necessary to make acknowledgments which if allowed to transpire, would greatly damage his reputation, if not as a man, yet perhaps as a professor of religion. Should confession, in this instance, be made beyond the closet, some

Christian friend, to whose confidence he would willingly intrust his reputation, property, and life, may be profitably consulted in the matter. His pastor, if worthy of his office, deserves to be held in such repute. Or, failing this, let him seek some private friend whose faithful counsel and generous sympathy will help him to regain his former standing.

Or, supposing that the backslider himself occupies a public post as a teacher of others, let him pursue the same course in relation to some brother minister of established reputation, which he would expect a member of his own flock to exercise in relation to himself. Let him go and tell him all the truth ; imploring his intercessions and his counsels, in order to the restoration of his soul to the paths of righteousness. In every such instance, secrecy should be inviolable.

Not so, however, when the case is flagrant and notorious. Compassion for the sinner must never induce us to extenuate sin. If, therefore, the backslider has claims on our pity, so has the cause which he has outraged ; so has the religion which he has betrayed. And, surely, if we pity him, we should pity others too ;—the weaker brethren who are disheart-

ened and enfeebled by his fall, and the perishing around who have taken license from his sin to harden themselves in iniquity. And, if these considerations be not enough to awaken our indignation, let us endeavour to view his conduct in the awful light which revelation throws upon it, as crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting him to an open shame, Heb. vi. 6, and then, assuredly, we shall feel little inclination to "justify the wicked," Exod. xxiii. 7. But, on the other hand, indignation must not annihilate compassion. The highest instance in the universe is to the contrary. Sin, to an infinitely holy being, must be an object of ineffable displeasure; yet, "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved," John iii. 17.

In order to restoration, sin must be forsaken as well as confessed, and hated, moreover, as well as forsaken. The backslider who professes to return to God, while in his heart he loves the course which he denounces and abandons, is at best, only a self-deceiver; but, if while he confesses his guilt he continues to live in sin, his real character is that of an unblushing apostate.

The loss of happiness has been mentioned, in a former chapter, as one of the earliest results of declension. It is well for the backslider that such is the case. As in the material, so in the moral world, pain is not without its use : it may serve to warn the patient of his danger, and so prevent some greater calamity.

I have known instances, however, where depression has assumed an exaggerated form ; where, in fact, the tendency to “write bitter things” could plead no sanction but that of a mind, first disordered and enfeebled by its own misgivings, and then, oppressed and overburdened by the power of diabolical temptation. Perhaps, in most such cases, could we discern the operations of the inmost soul, the whole process would admit of easy explanation. Anxiety, probably in the first instance, arising from some reasonable cause, impairs the health ; the infirmities of the body next disorder the mind ; and then, in the midst of the double depression which is thus produced, infernal agency comes in with a force which threatens to carry everything before it. Thus, at a season when he seems to need repose, the weary veteran finds himself in the thickest of the fight ; “the fiery darts of the wicked”

begin to penetrate the very "shield of faith," and pressed out of measure, beyond strength, he despaired even of life.

Of such a fact, the following is an instance.

A good man, of unblemished reputation, and of honourable standing in the church, had long been the subject of deep depression. The account which I heard of his sufferings, at length determined me to visit him, in the hope of conveying some consolation to his wounded spirit. On reaching the place of his residence, I was presently informed that I had lost my labour, as it would be impossible to obtain an interview. Determined, however, to carry my point, I went to the house. The young woman, who opened the door, assured me that he could not be seen;—that, in fact, no one, excepting those in necessary attendance, had seen him for the last four months. Prepared for this announcement, I laid my plans accordingly; and keeping her in conversation all the while, advanced some little way into the passage. I then told her that, as I had journeyed from a distance for the express purpose of seeing my friend in his affliction, I would take upon myself all the consequences of refusing to be denied.

From a room hard by, the door of which was not quite closed, I heard a low moaning noise, as of one worn out by suffering. Thither, at once, I hastened ; and on entering it, found the object of my search, cowering over the fire, and trembling from head to foot, as he gazed at me with an expression of most fearful terror. At the first glance, I could hardly satisfy myself that the poor shrivelled being, sitting there, was the man whom I had known in health, and strength, and usefulness. But the outline was still the same ; the mere skeleton was left. “No one shall come here,” he said, somewhat angrily, “I will see nobody.” “Well, my brother,” I replied, “but you *must* see *me*. I heard that you were in deep waters, and therefore ——.” “Don’t call me ‘brother,’—don’t call me ‘brother,’” he passionately exclaimed, “I never was a brother of yours. I have been a hypocrite all my life ; preaching Christ to others, while an enemy to God myself.” “Admitting your statement to be true, what a mercy,” I remarked, “that this fearful discovery was not reserved for another world !” “I hardly know that,” he replied ; “I would rather prefer being in hell. There, I could not suffer more than I do at present, and in that case my

sufferings would not distress my friends, nor bring such a disgrace upon religion, as they now do. Oh, that he would hide me in the grave ! But, I shall not be here much longer. Each day seems likely to prove my last."

Throughout a lengthened conversation, I made as little allusion as possible to his past experience or present feelings, but endeavoured to direct his thoughts, away from himself, to the simplicity and freeness of the offer of salvation;—that whosoever will may come, and that whosoever comes shall in no wise be cast out.

At length, finding it of little use to reason with him further, and desirous of inflicting no unnecessary fatigue on one who was so unable to bear it, I proposed to close the interview with prayer. "No, no," said he, "that I cannot allow. To pray for me would be an insult to the Majesty of heaven. For the last two months, I have never once prayed for myself." "The greater, then, the reason," I replied, "why others should not cease to pray for you." After a while, he consented ; but, only on this condition,—that in any allusion I might make to his case, I would describe him, not as a backslider, but as a hypocrite. "Why," I in-

quired, "should I describe you at all? Suppose we only pray for blessings which every one must have, or perish." "That will do," he said; "then, I have no objection."

While we were praying together, he wept. Those, as I was afterwards informed, were the first tears he had been seen to shed for many weeks; and they seemed like the breaking out of a fountain in the desert. When we rose from our knees, and I expressed my persuasion that he would live to see brighter days, a faint smile played across his haggard countenance, as much as to say—"Who can tell!"

Already he had become more calm, but I hastened to depart. He expressed himself thankful for my visit; and about a fortnight afterwards, he sent me the delightful information that, from that hour, he began to amend; that his mind had already regained its former tranquillity, and that there was every reason to hope that his bodily health would sympathize with the change. That hope was realized, and before he was gathered to his fathers, some happy years were given him to testify afresh, that the ways of wisdom are pleasantness, and that her paths are peace.

In all our attempts to restore the backsliding,

it is well to remember, that apart from faith, hope is fallacious. The mind that rejects divine testimony is not in a condition to receive divine consolation. Unless, therefore, the facts of the Gospel are honestly believed, revival is utterly preposterous. Among those facts, the atonement and mediation of Christ, as the ground of our acceptance and justification, and the agency of the Holy Spirit, as the only source of real sanctity, are so important and essential, as to constitute the very basis of experimental religion. And since "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid," 1 Cor. iii. 11, to build upon the quicksand is manifestly a hopeless task.

The penitent backslider, when restored to the favour of God, should also be re-instated in the confidence of his brethren; and the rather, perhaps, when his case has been one of public scandal. The world is prone enough to insult the fallen, and to despise the heartbroken; but Jesus breaks not the bruised reed, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory, Matt. xii. 20. From his tenderness, we should take the pattern of our own, and restore such a one, in the spirit of meekness, considering ourselves,

lest we also be tempted, Gal. vi. 1. The case which occurred in the Corinthian church was a very flagrant one, and yet the reclaimed backslider was, by apostolic direction, promptly received into fellowship again, lest he "should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow," 2 Cor. ii. 7.

Restoration to fraternal confidence and affection, should not only be prompt, but complete. There must be no subsequent upbraidings ; no cruel allusions to the past. We are to receive one another, as Christ also received us, Rom. xv. 7 ; a reception which fulfilled the prophetic declaration, that he would cast all our iniquities into the depths of the sea, Micah vii. 19, and that he would remember our sin no more, Jer. xxxi. 34.

On the part of the backslider, however, especially when his departure from God has been marked and notorious, there must never be the same readiness to forget the past, which his brethren are expected and required to manifest. The painful recollections which burden his heart, he must never utterly dismiss from his closet meditations. He may say nothing, to others, about the matter ; but, if truly penitent, his grief will survive his guilt ; and, though

God may have forgiven him, he will never forgive himself. Thus, the psalmist, after his fall, bewailed his broken bones, Psalm li. 8 ; and Hezekiah, when respited from the sentence which his vanity had brought upon him, and permitted to live although he had been doomed to die, resolved to "go softly," all his remaining years, in the bitterness of his soul, Isaiah xxxviii. 15. And, such is the safest course for the restored backslider. Should he forget to "go softly," the apprehension is that he will fall again, and fall to rise no more. He must remember, too, that if once he had a character to lose, he has now only a character to gain ; and that every consideration, which renders acquirement more difficult than possession, should make him remarkable for caution, modesty, prudence, and humility. He must learn, moreover, to bear with meekness, the cruelty which would tear open his wounds afresh. The rough and ungenerous treatment, which he hardly expected, and which he might have been spared, must only awaken his thankfulness, that God is more-merciful than man. And, when he finds himself regarded with suspicion, by some whose confidence would delight his heart, he must only hate himself, and love them, not-

withstanding. As he excited the prejudice under which he labours, his only course is to live it down ; and this, he may yet accomplish, by patient continuance in well doing, and taking especial care to set a double guard against that temptation by which he fell.

But, supposing the whole of a man's discipleship to have been fictitious—What then? Conversion, or ruin ; pardon, or damnation. In such a case, let not a moment be wasted in searching for that which has no existence. Time is now too precious to be spent in fruitless inquiries. No longer ask, then—"How may I prove myself a Christian?" but, with the Philippian gaoler,—"What must I do to be saved?"* Acts xvi. 30.

The grand matters of religion lie within a very narrow compass. The invitation is to all the weary, and the promise—rest, Matt. xi. 28. If moral qualifications were as necessary for the first act of faith, as they are for a subsequent profession, there would be an end to

* The reader, who wishes to pursue that question, is referred to "THE GREAT CHANGE," by the Rev. Dr. Redford, "THE ANXIOUS INQUIRER," by the Rev. J. A. James, and two of the preceding volumes of this series, "DAMASCUS," and "CHORAZIN."

human hope, as in that case universal condemnation would involve mankind. But the Gospel meets the sinner, as he is, "without strength;" it reconciles him, while an enemy, Rom. v. 10. Therefore, to look for reasons of hope, apart from the grand security of hope,—the doctrines of the cross,—is utterly fallacious. The thing which the sinner, on first coming to Christ, is required to believe, is not that *he* is saved, (for he is *not*, and to believe it would consequently be to believe a lie,) but that "this is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," of whom he now accounts himself the chief, 1 Tim. i. 15. Believing this, he goes. But, if instead of thus betaking himself to the Saviour, he should say—"I would believe, if I were not so unworthy;" or,—"*I would hope, if I were not so unbelieving;*"—he is, all the while, directing his attention to the operations of his own mind, instead of the glorious Gospel of the blessed God;—a reef of error where, not a few, "concerning faith, have made shipwreck."

This little volume will probably fall into the hands of some to whom the greater portion of its contents are happily inapplicable. To such,

however, would I make my closing appeal, not only in the spirit of the caution—"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," 1 Cor. x. 12, but also for the purpose of suggesting the inquiry—whether their present religious position is as available as it might be, for the glory of God and the salvation of men ;—whether talent, experience, property, influence, and the various endowments with which they are favoured, are all rendered as tributary to these purposes, as they might become ; especially, whether the things in question are such as it will appear that they ought to have been made, when mortal life, after its scenes have finally passed away, shall become a subject of review before the throne of God and of the Lamb.

We have, at present, within our reach, spheres of usefulness, and appliances of holy labour, for the possession of which, Gabriel, if he might, would become incarnate. To contribute such glory to the cross, as we may bring, and such honour to the Saviour of the world, as we may render, is more than Heaven has yet allowed to angelic ministry. "The spirits of just men made perfect," "the glorious company of the apostles," "the goodly fellowship

of the prophets," and "the noble army of martyrs," would, for a while, relinquish their crowns and their thrones, to share such opportunities of benevolence as fall to the lot of the present generation. Peoples, nations, and languages, await our efforts; and the universe is looking on, to see whether we are the men for the times. India is open to our missions. The wall of China is a barrier no more. The plains, the rivers, the forests of Africa, invite the daring of holy enterprise. Meanwhile, every wind, that blows on Britain, bears the cry of perishing millions—"Come over, and help us." And, shall we hold back our property as too valuable,—our sons and daughters as too precious,—or shall we think our lives too dear,—to be sacrificed in such a service? The whole creation is waiting our reply.

Brethren! the time is short. The eye that reads this page, with the hand that wrote it, must return to dust. Mementos of our mortality are so numerous that to mention them would only serve to prove a fact which nobody denies. A little longer, and for us consumption, fever, apoplexy, and the various less frequent messengers of death, shall have done their work. A little longer, and for us the

mourners will “go about the streets.” Whatsoever, therefore, our hand findeth to do, let us do it with our might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither we are going, Eccles. ix. 10.

If any deliverance is to be wrought in Israel, by our means, now is the time. Then, by the claims of redeeming love, by the groans of a dying world, by the joys of heaven, by the pains of hell,—yea, by the very dreams of a slumbering church, let us charge ourselves that we sleep not as do others, but watch till we hear the cry—“Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him,” Matt. xxv. 6.

“Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.” Jude 24, 25.

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